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Triangulating the Historical Birth Date of Jesus

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As part of the genre of ancient historical biographies, the canonical gospels can be inherently difficult to analyze. Far different from modern biographies, ancient texts often focus on conveying the character or significance of an individual, as opposed to a chronological and purely historical retelling of the important events in the figure's life. This is certainly the case with the gospels of the New Testament and their portrayal of Jesus. That said, there is little doubt that Jesus, as a historical figure, did exist. Given this, the reality is that documents of the New Testament make up the overwhelming majority of primary source information that exists about Jesus as a historical figure – however historically accurate or inaccurate the gospels may be. It is worth noting, while on the subject, that one's interpretation of the canonical literature, as either being more historical in nature or more of history metaphorized, is largely based on the reader's own worldview. Whatever the case, although several non-canonical ancient sources do speak of Jesus, there is no avoiding the central importance of the gospels to our study of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, to analyze a specific facet of Jesus' historical life, one is left with little alternative to diving head-first into the depths of the canonical texts.

With that in mind, the particular question at hand is when the historical Jesus was actually born? Two of the canonical gospels speak to the subject of Jesus' birth story, while the other two do not. Not surprisingly, the result has been two general and opposing theories as to when Jesus was born – one derived from Matthew's account of the gospel and the other from Luke's account. This has created two schools of thought regarding the dating of Jesus' birth: the first of which suggests that Matthew's account is the more historically accurate version (with regard to the birth stories), dating Jesus' birth to sometime between 3 BC and 6 BC; the second believes that Luke's account of the story is more accurate, dating Jesus' birth to sometime between 6 AD and 7 AD. This paper will explore the logic behind both of these opposing theories and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each. In consideration of both Matthew's and Luke's canonical accounts, input from numerous other sources, and the analysis of two scholars' opposing arguments on the issue, I shall argue for a variation on the former position, leading to the conclusion that the historical Jesus was actually born sometime between late December of 5 BC and March 11th of 4 BC.

To properly support and explain this thesis, it is necessary to first conduct an analysis of the birth stories, as they appear in both Matthew and Luke, and to discuss the corresponding birthdates of Jesus that each suggests. First, we will consider Matthew's account of the birth narrative and the resulting birthdate conclusions commonly drawn from his text; these commonly repeated stock arguments, concerning the dating of Jesus' birth in accordance with the Gospel of Matthew, will henceforth be referred to as the 'Matthew camp' or the 'Matthaeian model.' According to adherents of

this model, Jesus was born between 3 BC and 6 BC. Although this is not explicitly stated anywhere in Matthew's Gospel, this range of dates can be established by triangulating key excerpts from Matthew with other non-canonical historical records. In chapter one of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' mother, Mary, was impregnated with the 'Holy Spirit' after she was "betrothed to Joseph, [but] before they came together" (Mt 1:18). Joseph was accordingly under the impression that Mary had cheated on him and was set to divorce her, until an "angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit...'" (Mt 1:20). The first chapter of Matthew concludes with Mary giving birth to her first child and naming him Jesus; note that the actual textual account of the birth does not mention any date whatsoever, as it simply reads: "...And did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus" (Mt 1:25). While these excerpts from chapter one of Matthew admittedly add no value for the purposes of establishing Jesus' birth date, they serve to set up the contents of his second chapter, which have several key revelations.

Matthew's second chapter begins as such: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold wise men from the East came to Jerusalem..." (Mt 2:1). As unimpressive as this excerpt may seem in terms of establishing a specific date, it is of monumental importance to our task. Matthew's opening remarks in chapter two establish a key chronological reference point, which will be one aspect of the fundamental reasoning behind the aforementioned thesis. At this point we know that Jesus was born sometime during the life of King Herod, who ruled over Judea – at least according to Matthew. We will soon bring in non-canonical sources to help quantify what Matthew reports, but first it is prudent to finish developing our reference points from Matthew's Gospel. Matthew goes on to write, "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him" (Mt 2:3). Although not of critical importance, this passage serves to reiterate Matthew's report that Herod was the king at the time, and it also implies that Herod was powerful enough to sway public opinion – based on "and all of Jerusalem with him" from the excerpt. In addition, this selection from Matthew helps locate Herod in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' birth, as its wording suggests that the king was physically present. Accordingly, we can eliminate from birthdate contention any extended periods of time during which we know King Herod was away from Jerusalem.

Continuing with chapter two of Matthew, the passage that follows is another fundamental building block of the 'Matthew Camp' theory (and of my thesis): "'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.' When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt,

and was there until the death of Herod..." (Mt 2:13-15). This portion of Matthew serves as one bookend for the date of Jesus' birth, as it establishes that Herod died shortly after Jesus' birth and exodus to Egypt; granted, the period of time between Jesus' escape to Egypt and Herod's death is unspecified. However, one can infer that it was a relatively short timeframe, given that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus had no family, property, possessions, or means of living established in Egypt, to our knowledge. Thus, one can assume that the family was in hiding for only a short period of time, perhaps several months at the most. With these excerpts from Matthew's version of the birth story, one can confidently ascertain the following: Jesus was born while King Herod was still alive and ruling, but also shortly before his death.

Although the information extracted just previously from the Gospel of Matthew is very helpful in establishing chronological bookends for dating the birth of Jesus, we should not let Matthew off the hook too easily, by simply accepting his account as entirely historical. Critics of the Matthean model generally point to several issues that challenge the historicity of the Gospel of Matthew, including: the intensely Jewish theological overtones of the story, which convey very strong parallels between the life of Moses and the life of Jesus; and reliance on the historicity of the 'divine star' in the Matthean birth narrative, among other issues. By far the most common (and valid) of these criticisms is the suggestion that Matthew's theological persistence of comparing the life of Jesus to that of Moses fatally compromises the historicity of his account (Smith, 292). To support this allegation, many-a-Lucan scholar has pointed to the fact that the Gospel of Mathew has Jesus and his family forced to flee to Egypt to escape the tyrannical, baby-killing King Herod. There is no arguing the fact that this implies (or rather shouts out) obvious parallels between the life of Jesus and that of Moses: Moses led his people out of Egypt in the great exodus to escape the tyrannical, evil Pharaoh; Jesus and his family had an exodus to Egypt to escape King Herod. Moses had to suffer in the Egyptian desert for years before the exodus; Jesus had to suffer in exile in Egypt for a considerable period of time before returning home with his family, following King Herod's death. Hosea 11:1 reads: "Out of Egypt I called my Son." Matthew 2:15 reads the same. There are, undoubtedly, very strong parallels between the life of Moses and that of Jesus as portrayed by the Gospel of Matthew.

However, scholars like Professor Smith miss the key point when they make this argument: it does not matter how strong these theological parallels are, and it does not even matter if these theological parallels compromise the historicity of the Gospel of Matthew, because they don't interfere with the passages of Mathew that are critical to my purpose – that is, to my objective of triangulating the actual birth date of the historical Jesus through use of the canonical texts (the Gospel of Matthew in this case). If one thinks about some of the previously mentioned theological parallels that might be

historically inaccurate, it quickly becomes apparent that none of those passages affect the triangulation of Jesus' birthdate. For example, let us take away the excursion of Jesus and his family into Egypt and see how much it affects our chronological analysis. While I do mention Jesus' Egyptian exodus to contribute to the analysis, it is by no means essential to my argument. Again, one can take away all the parallels in the gospel that occur after Jesus' infancy and they do not affect the triangulation of Jesus' birth in the least.

The only passages that our triangulation efforts *critically* rely on are those that mention King Herod and his death: namely, Matthew 2:1, 3, and the first clause of Matthew 2:15 ("And was there until the death of Herod..."). While several other passages from Matthew lend support, none are as critical as these three – and none of these three are historically compromised by any textual reconstructions that might occur throughout the rest of the gospel.

Two final disputes must first be dealt with before we can settle the matter. The first is to counter Professor Smith's claim that he does "not think that Matthew had any intention of offering a historical account of Jesus' birth. His aim was not historical but theological. He may have taken his lead from a tradition that Jesus' birth took place around the time of an unspecified Herod, and on the basis of that he may have substituted Herod the Great for Herod Archelaus as a way of building his theological and literary edifice. But this is pure speculation. I do not think that Matthew can be accused of falsifying the historical facts if he never intended to write a historical account" (Smith, 292). The issue with this litany of conjecture is two-fold: first off, Smith attempts to discredit the overall historicity of Matthew's gospel by rejecting (several times throughout his essay) the nearly undisputable fact that both Matthew and Luke's references to 'King Herod' is made in reference to King Herod the Great; he attempts this (and fails miserably) by arguing that the Herod references in Matthew and Luke (Mt 2:1: "in the days of Herod the king"; Mt 2:3: "When Herod the king hear this,"; Mt 2:15: "until the death of Herod"; Lk 1:5: "in the days of Herod, the king of Judea,"); Mt 2:22: "But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod...") could be intended to refer towards the Great Herod's son, Herod Archelaus. This is a weak attempt at discrediting an entire book's worth of information – that is, all of Matthew's account.

My second issue with Smith's laundry list of allegations against Matthew's account is that even if Matthew did invent parts of his story to better align Jesus' life with that of Moses (which I'm sure he probably did to a certain extent) it is a far cry to jump from inventing small parts of the story to make a theological point, and wholesale inventing an entire story. It seems very unlikely that Matthew would

have done that, especially in light of the fact that Luke arrived at very similar references as Matthew (i.e., King Herod the Great), with the primary exception being Luke's Quirinius reference.

The final dispute to settle on this matter is over the notion that Matthew's gospel automatically lacked historical accuracy, simply because it makes a concerted effort to convey a theological point. In other words, why would it not be possible for Matthew to have made the best theological point out of the available historical facts? After all, there is nothing inherently implausible about most of the events that Matthew uses to draw parallels between Jesus' life and Moses' life – not to say that is by any means enough proof to claim historicity. However, with or without further investigation, one should not immediately conclude falsification either.

Now that we have given proper consideration to one of the more common scholarly objections to the historicity of Matthew's birth narrative, we shall return to implementing the Matthaean bookends (of Jesus' birthdate) in our triangulation efforts. While very helpful within the context of the full discussion, the notion that Jesus was born while King Herod was alive, but shortly before his death is practically worthless without the assistance of non-canonical texts that report ancient history of the same time period. It is analogous to telling a friend that you expect to meet him for lunch at the local café on a particular Monday that will occur sometime this year, without providing the specific date you are referencing. Fortunately, however, ancient Jewish historian Flavius Josephus reported on the history of that time period in his book titled *Jewish Antiquities*, which allows us to triangulate the dates (years) that Matthew references in his Gospel. According to Josephus, King Herod was proclaimed the king of Judea in late 40 BC; he continues to say that Herod ruled for 37 years from the time of his proclamation (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.8.1). This account would put Herod's death sometime in the year 3 BC, and Jesus' birth sometime in the months preceding that. Thus, the basic rationale for the Matthew-based theory is established: Jesus' birth was sometime during the life of Herod the Great and within months of Herod's death; this establishes the lower limit for the general approximation of 3 BC to 6 BC.

The aforementioned discussion is sufficient for the generic argument behind Matthew's version of the birth story, but to establish a more accurate timeline (and to consider the upper limit of 6 BC), one must delve further into the supporting non-canonical evidence. Namely, the date of Herod's death needs substantial revision to hone in on a more precise birth date for Jesus. Simple arithmetic has led many scholars to initially assume 3 BC as the year in which Herod the Great died. However, as the course Focus Reading on the *Birth of Jesus*, points out, "There is considerable debate as to whether Josephus was reckoning according to solar years, or following the accession-year chronology (Herod did not gain possession of his domain until 37 BC)" (*Birth of Jesus*, 67). The first important piece of

information to take from this excerpt is that the dating of Herod's death to 3 BC might require adjusting, based on how Josephus was counting the years of Herod's reign. The second key point that this passage highlights is that Josephus might not have included the first three years of Herod's rule in his 37 year estimation, because Herod did not fully take over control until the year 37 BC – three years after his proclamation was announced. If this were the case, one could easily foresee a reconstruction that places Herod's death towards the end of the year 1 BC, and accordingly Jesus' birthday very near that date as well.

The intriguing aspect of this possible reconstruction is that it would result in dating Jesus' birth date in a narrow range that includes Jesus' popularly acclaimed birth date of December 25th, 1 BC. Does this help to substantiate this option? Probably not, especially when one considers that the Scythian monk, Dionysius, who first established December 25th 753 A.U.C (annos urbis conditae, which means years after the founding of Rome) as Jesus' birth date – the same date as December 25th, 1 BC, because January 1st, AD 1 was established as the start of 754 A.U.C – did so in the year 525 AD at the request of Pope John I (Smith, 278). This means that the original calculation of Jesus' birthdate as December 25th, 1 BC, was undertaken well over 500 years after the actual event. The most convincing evidence against this reconstruction theory is Josephus' assertion that King Herod "reigned since he had procured Antigonus to be slain, thirty-four years; but since he had been declared king by the Romans, thirty-seven" (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.8.1). In addition to this, we know from Josephus that Antigonus died in 37 AD (Josephus, *Ant.* 15.1). From these two figures it is we can come to the conclusion that Josephus' count of Herod's 37-year reign started with the year 40 BC and included Herod's first three years of partial authority (*Birth of Jesus*, 67). This counting method places Herod's death at 3 BC, once again, making the notion of a 1 BC Jesus birthdate very unlikely.

Although we have landed on the year 3 BC as the date of Herod's death and Jesus' birthdate twice now, it is still not the best theory that can be put forth in accordance with Matthew's Gospel and the supportive non-canonical evidence of the period. Rather, the most precise estimate we can make places Herod's death sometime between March 13th and April 11th of 4 BC (*Birth of Jesus*, 67). This estimate is very strongly supported by the non-canonical evidence available, and also fits seamlessly with what we know about Jesus' birthdate from the Gospel of Matthew itself. Two key pieces of evidence provide support: first, according to the *Birth of Jesus* Focus Reading, "Josephus also tells us that an eclipse of the moon occurred shortly before Herod's death" (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.167 in *Birth of Jesus*, 67); secondly, the reading goes on to say, "He also informs us that Passover was celebrated shortly after Herod's death" (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.213; *Jewish Wars* 2.10 in *Birth of Jesus*, 67). Josephus'

remark that a lunar eclipse occurred shortly before the death of Herod might seem bizarre, if it were not for the fact that current lunar records indicate just such an event occurred on March 12th and 13th of the year 4 BC – just about one year prior to the supposed 3 BC birthdate of Jesus. Furthermore, the Passover celebration would have been held on April 11th in 4 BC, assuming that it was held in standard observance of the tradition (*Birth of Jesus*, 67). Given Josephus' specific bracketing of Herod's death, and the exactness and measurability of the dates associated with these bookend events, one who follows the Matthaean model is left with a very convincing argument that King Herod died sometime between March 14th and April 11th of 4 BC; this would place Jesus' birthdate somewhere in the several months preceding Herod's death: between late December of 5 BC and early March of 4 BC (with the remote possibility of Jesus' birth being at the end of the year 6 BC, depending upon how one interprets Mt 2:13-15 and the inferred time period between Jesus' birth and Herod's death – note that this would establish the upper limit of 6 BC in the Matthew camp).

The only evidence within the Matthew-based model that disagrees with the conclusion is Josephus' dating of Herod's 37-year reign as starting in 40 BC and ending in 3 BC. However, based on the fact that many scholars still question the precise nature and method of Josephus' counting, I am confident in assigning "inclusive counting" as the reason behind the discrepancy (*Birth of Jesus*, 67). Such inclusive counting could have meant that Herod's rule started in January of the year 40 BC and ended in early April of 4 BC; while the actual length of this reign would have been 36.25 years, one could foresee Josephus including the final year in its entirety and reporting a 37 year reign. Such explanation is very plausible and also allows the vast majority of the Matthaean-canonical evidence to exist in harmony. As such, I conclude that Jesus was born sometime between late December of 5 BC and early March of 4 BC, based on the Matthaean model.

To complete the analysis of the Jesus' historical birthdate, we must now shift our focus to the Lucan model. (Note that for the purposes of simplifying terminological references, this paper shall refer to frequently made stock arguments derived from the Gospel of Luke, as the 'Lucan model' or 'Luke-based theory.')

Professor Mark D. Smith, of Albertson College in Caldwell, Idaho, is one of the relatively few scholars who throw has thrown all of their weight behind the Lucan model. As will shortly become evident, Smith's conclusions are contradictory to the findings of my thesis, as guided by the Matthaean model.

According to Smith and Lucan theory, the birthdate of the historical Jesus can be traced to the year 6 or 7 AD. Smith bases this model on several key excerpts from the Gospel of Luke. The first of these critical passages is the following, taken from Luke 2:1-2, "And it came to pass in those days that a

decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria” (Lk 2:1-2). Similar to the excerpts taken from Matthew, this quote is relatively meaningless until we apply the specifics mentioned in Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities* to the report given by Luke. However, a brief examination of Josephus’ material clearly indicates that Quirinius was not appointed governor of the province of Judea until 6 AD, when Herod Archelaus (son of the then-former Herod the Great) was deposed by the Roman authorities, after a series of rebellious Jewish uprisings in Judea (Smith, 278-279). As Smith appropriately points out, “A problem arises, however, when one compares Matthew’s account with that of Luke, for while the latter mentions Herod, he also claims that the census that drew Joseph and the expectant Mary to Bethlehem was precipitated by the Roman legate to Syria, Publius Sulpicius Quirinius” (Smith, 278).

The central issue that is posed here – and really the crux of the debate between Matthaean and Lucan priority on the birth date theory – is that if we are correct in interpreting Luke’s Gospel to reference the census taken under Quirinius’ rule, in 6 AD, as the approximate date of Jesus’ birth, the result is a direct conflict between Matthew’s version of the story and Luke’s. Matthew’s model dates Jesus’ birth to sometime between 3 BC and 6 BC, while Luke’s model places Jesus’ birth in 6 or 7 AD – over ten years later. There is also a second huge problem with this model that is an issue of internal incongruence within Luke’s own story: in Luke 1:5 Luke writes, “There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias...” (Lk 1:5). In this excerpt it seems that Luke is referencing King Herod as ruling over Judea; yet in Luke 2:1-2 he also cites Quirinius as the governor of the province, Syria. This issue brought forth here is that King Herod the Great ruled from 40 BC to his death in 4 BC, while Quirinius didn’t become governor of Syria until 6 AD. This poses a clear inconsistency within Luke’s story, as it has Jesus’ birth narrative occurring in two separate time periods, under two different rulers. Furthermore, it begs the question of Luke, why even mention Quirinius, since he was the governor of Syria?

In his essay titled *Of Jesus and Quirinius* Professor Smith recognizes this dilemma, and offers several possible explanations – most of which he then rejects or cites as possible-but-not-probable until he reaches his climactic explanation, which is the crux of his Luke-based model of dating Jesus’ birthdate. To introduce the two explanations that he rejects as not probable, Smith writes, “There have been two attempts to overcome this difficulty...one approach argue[s] that Quirinius must have served two terms as legate in Syria, the first during the reign of King Herod the Great...the other contend[s] that Luke was mistaken in his chronology” (Smith, 279). By acknowledging the possibility of reconstructions that would harmonize the Lucan information into the Matthaean model, but then rejecting them,

Professor Smith is setting the stage for his concluding argument, in which he endorses the Lucan model, and in doing so rejects the Matthaean model. It is this very incompatible nature of the two birth narratives that is so fascinating: harmonizing the two accounts is not an easy task, and really the only manner in which it can be accomplished is by explaining away the disagreeing evidence in the less-favored model, until that less-favored model has become nearly an exact replica of the favored model. In many ways this is similar to the modern liberal interpretation of Jesus that results in Jesus simply being a reflection of one's self – and I cannot pretend that I am not guilty of this in my analysis as well.

Whatever the case, Smith goes on to reject the two aforementioned possibilities by citing that non-canonical historical evidence contradicts the notion that Quirinius could have served two terms as governor, among other reasons; as for the second possibility, Smith counters it when he writes, "Although this view succeeds in partially harmonizing the accounts of Matthew and Luke, it fails to take into account the serious problems it raises concerning the nature of the evidence and the internal consistency of Luke's Gospel" (Smith, 282). While I must admit that Luke's narrative is well-organized and clearly makes a concerted effort to at least appear historical in nature, there is a counter-argument to Smith's position that is fairly credible and cannot be dismissed with such simplicity. This argument, which is one that Smith first puts forth, before countering it as unlikely, is as follows: Luke might have invented the Quirinius census in an attempt to make Jesus and his family look like "loyal subjects of Rome and not rebellious zealots" (Smith, 284). Smith quickly dismisses this possibility, by arguing Luke would not have compromised the future historicity of his document by inventing such a census, simply for the chance to make a theological point. However, given the high level of Christology present throughout the Gospel of Luke (perhaps not as much Christology as John's account, but a fair amount nonetheless), I would caution against such a hasty dismissal.

Ultimately, Professor Smith reaches the conclusion that Luke's account is the historically accurate birthdate model, and he harmonizes the disagreeing information in Matthew's narrative by questioning the overall historicity of Matthew's Gospel and by citing that the "Herod" referenced in Matthew was likely Herod of Archelaus, not King Herod the Great (as previously discussed). Smith writes, "Those holding the traditional view take Matthew as the starting point, they do so apparently without subjecting Matthew's reference to Herod to the same searching criticism that has been applied to Luke's reference to Quirinius" (Smith, 291).

While I cannot disagree with the deeply theological, Jewish tradition engrained in Matthew, I think that Smith's argument has two fatal flaws. The first is that his attempt to discredit Matthew's narrative, by questioning which Herod he refers to, is not convincing. In Matthew 2:1 and 3 Herod is

introduced and referred to as “Herod the king.” Although Matthew does reference him as simply “Herod” at several points in the Gospel, this is after having introduced Herod initially with his title of king. Furthermore, in Matthew 2:22 he introduces Herod Archelaus as such: “But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there” (Mt 2:22). This verse demonstrates beyond a reasonable doubt that Matthew was fully aware of the distinction between King Herod the Great and his son Herod Archelaus. In addition, in Luke’s narrative Herod is introduced as “Herod, the king of Judea” (Lk 1:5). While Luke could be referring to Herod Archelaus, that is highly unlikely, given that Augustus demoted Archelaus from his inherited king title very shortly after his proclamation as the ruler of Judea. Instead, Augustus gave Archelaus the title of ethnarch. Smith acknowledges this when he writes, “Josephus suggests that Herod, in his last will, had bequeathed to Archelaus the title king...Even after Augustus had reviewed the Great Herod’s will and demoted Archelaus and his brothers to the ranks of ethnarch and tetrarchs respectively, Josephus, apparently reflecting popular parlance, referred to Archelaus as ‘king’” (Smith, 286). While Smith’s argument that Luke could have been referring to Archelaus when he wrote “Herod, the king of Judea” is possible, it seems improbable – especially considering that Archelaus did not have the title of king until his father died, and even then, he only retained that title for a very short time, until he was immediately demoted by Augustus, following Herod the Great’s death (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.8.4).

The second critical flaw in Smith’s conclusion lies in his technique of harmonization. Smith ultimately harmonizes the differences between the two canonical accounts by simply throwing out all of the evidence and content of the Gospel of Matthew, based on his claim that its strong theological mission, linking the life of Jesus to that of Moses, inevitably compromises its historicity. Aside from the previously discussed counterarguments to this holistic attack on the Gospel of Matthew, there is structural flaw to this broad-sweeping conclusion as well: the best reconstruction of a historic event is generally that which makes the *best* sense of the *most* available data, while maintaining an uncompromised thesis (I shall refer to this notion as the ‘Fink-standard’ doctrine, for the purposes of simplifying the terminology). If we apply the Fink-standard doctrine to Smith’s ultimate conclusion, it is clearly evident that his Luke-based theory does not attain the same quality level as the Matthaean model. In other words, Smith’s model might make the *best* sense of *half* of the data, but it wholesale disregards the other half of the data. The Matthaean model (and my variation on the Matthaean model), on the other hand, makes the *best* sense of the *most* available data. Therefore, the second fatal flaw in Smith’s argument is that he suggests and supports a model that is inherently inferior to many alternative models, in terms of its structure (the amount of data that it cohesively incorporates).

This is not to suggest that Smith's model could not possibly be the best model among several options – it still could if the other models are not as logically developed. However, Smith's structural weakness does mean that, among otherwise equally qualified theories (in terms of the ability with which they explain and harmonize their various data sets) his is inherently the weakest because of its limited inclusion of data. Therefore, to accept that Smith's theory is the best model, not only does his model have to be as good as the others (from a logical perspective), it has to be significantly better than the others, to account for its limited inclusion of the data. Put simply, it is fair to hold a model of low-data-inclusivity levels to a higher-than-normal logic standard, given that it deals with far less of the available data.

With this in mind, we shall consider two prominent alternatives to Professor Smith's theory, both of which incorporates substantially more data than the Lucan model – these alternative models do not entirely discard either gospel, but rather attempt to harmonize the differences, by explaining interpretive or scribal errors in certain elements of the gospels. Each of these alternative theories focuses on explaining Luke's Quirinius reference (in Lk 2:2), so that the remaining preponderance of the evidence in the Gospel of Luke can stand, thus harmonizing the data found in Luke's account into the Matthaean model. Although numerous harmonizing theories of this nature exist, the following two hold exceptional merit as they are historically plausible, logically coherent, and retain a significant level of the available evidence.

The first of these theories, put forth by Professor Wayne Brindle in his essay titled *The Census and Quirinius*, postulates that the Greek adjective 'protos' should be translated differently in Luke 2:2, leading to the conclusion that Luke was referencing an earlier provincial census taken towards the end of King Herod's reign, under the general edict of Caesar and likely under the supervision of, then Consul, Quirinius (Brindle, 48-52). This theory has three key pillars of reasoning, each of which needs some level of explanation: the first pillar explains how Luke 2:2 could, and arguably should, be re-translated to reflect an earlier census; the second pillar establishes the probability that an earlier census could have been taken under King Herod's rule; and the third pillar explains why Caesar and Quirinius would have been mentioned in Luke 2:1-2 if the census Luke references was, in fact, carried out under Herod's rule. If one comes to accept the reasoning of this theory, the new circumstances of Luke 2:1-2 align very well with the rest of Luke's account of the birth narrative and with Matthew's account, as well.

The first fundamental pillar of this theory is that the translation of Luke 2:2 ("This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria") is not precise, and needs adjustment. Brindle borrows this notion from Harvard Professor L.H. Feldman, who suggests that "Luke 2:2 can be vindicated only if

we translate [Luke 2:2 as follows,] ‘This census was the first before that under the prefectureship of Quirinius in Syria’” (Feldman, 19.3 in Brindle, 48-49). This new wording of Luke 2:2 is based on the fact the ‘protos’ can be translated as ‘first’ or ‘earlier’ or ‘former’ (Brindle, 49). However, Brindle does not stop there; he goes on to cite biblical academic Nigel Turner, who writes the following: “‘First census’ must be taken in its Hellenistic connotation as the first of two, and then we must expand the clause a little... ‘This census was before the census which Quirinius, governor of Syria, made’” (Turner, 23 in Brindle, 49).

This new version of text also makes sense when put in the perspective of the broader notion of what the adjusted Luke 2:2 excerpt would imply; that is, Turner’s version of Luke 2:2 suggest that there were two censuses that are being discussed – the first being the one that occurred during the time of Jesus’ birth and the second being the infamous census taken in 6-7 AD by Quirinius. As Brindle points out, “The very word ‘first’ indicates that there were at least two censuses in Judea” (Brindle, 49). The simplicity of this logic is compelling, especially when one considers Turner’s adjusted wording of Luke 2:2 from a non-grammatical perspective as well. By this, I mean that one must consider the fact that the census taken under Quirinius in 6-7 AD was infamous because of the ‘strife and rebellion’ that it caused (Brindle, 49). The people of Judea (primarily Jews) were not happy with an imperialistic outsider interfering with their provincial affairs to conduct the census (the census of 6-7 AD taken under, then-governor of Syria, Quirinius). Accordingly, it makes sense that “they remembered him (Quirinius) for his census, and Luke had [chose] purposely to distinguish between that census and the census during which Jesus was born” (Brindle, 49). Thus, through grammatical reconstruction and pointing out the logical desire for Luke to distinguish between the two different censuses, Brindle (with assistance of Feldman and Turner) establishes a plausible adjusted wording to Luke 2:2 – and in doing so establishes the first pillar of support for this theory.

The second key pillar of this theory aims at establishing the likelihood that an earlier census could have been taken during King Herod’s rule. Although some critics of this theory argue that Caesar never conducted a single census of the entire empire, and this is likely true, it does not rule out the possibility that an earlier provincial census might have been taken during the end of King Herod’s rule. In fact, many scholars believe that Caesar ordered an empire-wide edict for a census of the entire empire, which was actually carried out in the form of individual censuses to be taken among the cities of the empire and its many provinces. According to Sherwin-White, a biblical scholar very well-versed on the matter, “A census or taxation-assessment of the whole provincial empire was certainly accomplished for the first time in history under Augustus” (Sherwin-White, 168-169 in Brindle, 51). Sherwin-White goes

on to state, “The assessment of different provinces was undertaken at different and widely separated dates in the Principate of Augustus... Now it was the way of Augustus to issue general explanations of the particular actions of the central government” (Sherwin-White, 168-169). In this excerpt Sherwin-White makes a very important point: in an effort to comply with Caesar’s empire-wide orders, many annexed provinces, and even protectorates, were likely asked to conduct censuses.

Some scholars have attempted to counter this point by arguing that Caesar would not (and perhaps could not) have ordered a census in Judea at that point in time, as Judea was then a Roman protectorate, and therefore semi-autonomous. Critics argue that, accordingly, it would not have been customary for the Roman Emperor or Consul to intrude on the affairs of protectorates. While this is generally true, one must first consider the circumstances of the specific time during which this census would have occurred, namely sometime between 6 BC and 3 BC. During this time period (and note that the specific time period is dependent upon which model of dating King Herod’s death one assumes to be accurate), Josephus notes that the relationship between King Herod and Augustus became very strained and hostile towards the end of Herod’s 37 year reign. Josephus writes, “Caesar...grew very angry, and wrote to Herod sharply. The sum of his epistle was this, that whereas of old he had used him as his friend, he should now use him as his subject” (Josephus, *Ant.* 16.9.3 in Brindle, 51). Given this insight on the development of Herod and Caesar’s personal relationship, it is very plausible that Augustus could have taken a more authoritarian stance towards Herod and the protectorate of Judea. Brindle states this reasoning very concisely, when writes, “In Herod’s last days his kingdom came more and more under the direction and influence of Augustus...It would not be surprising therefore to find the emperor asking Herod to take a census for him in Judea. Augustus was probably anticipating Herod’s death” (Brindle, 51). With the help of Josephus’ insights (regarding King Herod’s personal relationship with Caesar) and the supportive reasoning of Sherwin-White and Professor Brindle, we can safely establish the likelihood of an early census being ordered in Judea, just prior to King Herod’s death.

Now we shall turn to the third and most pivotal pillar of this theory: an explanation of why Caesar and Quirinius would have both been mentioned in Luke 2:1-2 if the census Luke references was, in fact, carried out under Herod’s rule. To begin, let us review the specific wording of Luke 2:1-2: “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria” (Lk 2:1-2). We have previously established that the wording of Luke 2:1 could be adjusted to read, “This census was before the census which Quirinius, governor of Syria, made” (Turner, 23). Once adjusted, Luke 2:1-2 would read as follows: “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the

world should be registered. This census was before the census which Quirinius, governor of Syria, made.” Before any sophisticated analysis need be done, we should first comment on the improved logic of this adjusted version of the Luke 2:1-2, as the original version leaves the reader with a very curious question: if Judea was provincially independent from the Roman Empire during King Herod’s reign (as a Roman protectorate), and Syria was a part of the Roman Empire distinct from Judea (which it was) (*Map*), why would Luke mention that Quirinius was the unrelated governor of an unrelated province at the time of a census carried out in Judea? It just doesn’t make sense. It makes even less sense when one considers the fact that Quirinius didn’t become governor of Syria until 6 AD (although one model does suggest that Quirinius actually served two terms as governor of Syria, one between BC 9-6 and the other between AD 6-7).

In addition, Professor J. Finegan speculates that Quirinius was appointed Consul in 12 BC, which would likely have precluded him from holding a proconsul position (governorship) at the same time – albeit, we do not know exactly how long Quirinius supposedly served as Consul (Finegan, 235 in Brindle, 46). Although Josephus does speak to this issue, he is somewhat vague and does not specify what Quirinius might have done between being appointed Consul in 12 BC and his appointment to governor of Syria in 6 AD. Josephus writes, “Quirinius, a Roman senator who had proceeded through all the magistracies to the consulship and a man who was extremely distinguished in other respects, arrived in Syria, dispatched by Caesar to be governor of the nation, and to make an assessment of their property...Quirinius also visited Judea, which had been annexed to Syria, in order to make an assessment of the property of the Jews and to liquidate the estate of Archelaus. Although the Jews were at first shocked to hear of the registration of property, they gradually condescended, yielding to the arguments of the high priest Joazar, the son of Boethus, to go no further in opposition” (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.1). In this passage Josephus describes the infamous census of 6 AD, taken under Quirinius’ direction; we know that this particular census was taken in 6 AD, because Josephus mentions that Quirinius had come to “liquidate Archelaus’ estate,” and, because we can triangulate Archelaus’ demise from power to 6 AD (per Josephus and canonical sources), we are able to date that census in the year 6 AD (Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.8.1).

To return to the topic at hand, namely, explaining the reason Luke would have included Augustus Caesar and Quirinius in Luke 2:1-2, let us again consider the adjusted text of Luke 2:1-2: “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census was before the census which Quirinius, governor of Syria, made.” This adjusted text allows for a logical interpretation of the Quirinius reference, as Luke might have used the infamous

Quirinius census of 6 AD to identify the prior and less known census taken towards the end of Herod's reign. The strongest argument against this supposition is the fact that Josephus never references an earlier census (Brindle, 49). That said, as was previously mentioned, Josephus was particularly vague about certain parts of that time period (12 BC to 6 AD) – for instance, the activities of Quirinius. In light of Josephus' occasional vagueness, it is certainly plausible that there could have been a prior census that Josephus didn't report on, especially if it was a census limited only to the protectorate of Judea.

An alternative explanation for Luke's mention of Quirinius lies in the notion that Quirinius might have been the one to direct the census Judea, as Consul of the Roman Empire. Sherwin-White wrote the following related to this explanation: "It is likely that Quirinius issued the instructions for the census of Judea with an edict of Augustus, explaining that whereas the welfare of the whole Empire requires that no man should pay more than his due, and that the census should be completed throughout all the provinces, this is now to be undertaken in Judea at the same time as the revision of the census in Syria, - or in words to that effect...his whole statement means that the general policy of Augustus was carried out piecemeal in Judea" (Sherwin-White, 168-169). This excerpt suggests that Quirinius might have been mentioned by Luke, because he was charged with 'issuing the instructions' for the census, which was decreed by Augustus. This would explain both the Quirinius reference, as well as the Augustus reference in Luke 2:1-2.

The only remaining issue with this explanation is that Luke referred to Quirinius as 'governor' even though he would have been Consul (and therefore not proconsul or governor) at the time – at least according to this theory. Although this is certainly odd at first, it can be explained by simple terminological norms associated with service in public office. By this, I mean that it is very common for historians to refer to politicians by their most prestigious title, regardless of chronology. For instance, reporters today refer to George W. Bush as President Bush, not Governor Bush. Similarly, it is reasonable to see Luke referencing Quirinius as governor, even though he would have been Consul, not governor, at the time. Although, technically speaking Consul of the Roman Empire was the highest elected office in the state (under the Roman Republic), Luke might not have viewed it this way, given that the Consul had lost almost all of its power since the Roman Republic was transformed into the Roman Empire; in the Roman Empire, the Consul was merely a figurehead of the Republic's constitutional heritage, and accordingly held almost no formal power. Thus, Luke might have referred to then-Consul Quirinius as Governor Quirinius in hindsight of Quirinius' term as governor of Syria. If true, this theory would explain why Luke referenced Quirinius and Augustus Caesar in Luke 2:1-2, while referring to the earlier census taken at the end of King Herod's reign.

I find significant merit in this explanation, as it is easily foreseeable and it would harmonize Luke and Matthew's narratives chronologically; it implies that Luke was really referring to the first of two censuses, the latter of which was the famous census taken under Quirinius. Accordingly, it is plausible that Augustus would have mandated a census of the protectorate (something not usually done with protectorates) in preparation for transferring full rule of Judea to Roman provincial authority, after King Herod's death.

Now that we have thoroughly vetted the first alternative to Professor Smith's theory, we will turn our attention to a second prominent harmonizing theory. While the first alternative theory focused on explaining the Quirinius reference by altering the wording of Luke 2:2 and explaining complex, multi-faceted adjustments, this second theory, proposed by Cambridge Professor John Rist, focuses on explaining an error of confusion or transcription made by Luke or the early copiers of his gospel. This theory assumes the following sequence of transcription and assignment errors: Luke, his source, or an early copier made an error that resulted in Luke's account ultimately recording Quirinius as the governor of Syria at the time of Jesus' birth (we'll assume the Matthaean model's date for the sake of this argument: 6-3 BC), *instead of Quintilius* (Rist, 489 in *Journal of Theological Studies*, 490-491). Quirinius actually served as governor of Syria from 6-7 AD, while Quintilius served as governor beginning in late 7 BC or early 6 BC (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.89). This transcription error was then compounded by attaching the census taken under Quirinius in 6 AD to the recognition of the name 'Quirinius,' and assigning Quirinius and his census to a new and historically inaccurate time period – namely the time period during which Quintilius was governor of Syria, 7-6 BC (Rist, 490-491).

Although this likely would have been chronology of the error process, it is not what we end up seeing as the final, cumulative error product in Luke; instead of seeing Quirinius and his census time-transported back into the past to 7-6 BC when Quintilius was governor (and shortly before Jesus was born, at least according to this theory), we see Jesus' birthdate time-transported into the future (or the then-future) to AD 6. As one can clearly see, the direction in which the time travel of the transcription and assignment errors travel (forward or backward in time), depends upon which dated events we take as a given: Quirinius and his census in 6 AD or Jesus' birth in 6-3 BC. If we take Quirinius and his census as the starting point, we end up with an invalid 6 AD birthdate of Jesus; if we accept Jesus 6-3 BC birthdate as the starting point, we end up with an invalid date of Quirinius' governorship and census. Either way the result is the erroneous assignment of one of the two events into the other event's time frame. One is either left with a correct Quirinius and census date of 6 AD, but an impossible birthdate of Jesus at 6 AD (at least impossible if one hopes to align it with the rest of the evidence in Luke and the

evidenced in Matthew) or one ends up with an accurate birthdate of Jesus, in 6-3 BC, and an inaccurate date of governorship and census for Quirinius, in 6-3 BC. Whatever the case, from this reconstruction of the errors it is clear that “Luke (or his source [or copiers]) has blended a tradition about Jesus’ birth in the time of Quintilius (now confused with Quirinius) with the knowledge that Quirinius held a census, thus producing a confused historical setting for Jesus’ birth in the impossible AD 6” (Rist, 490-491).

Although this theory certainly sounds plausible, it holds little merit without supporting the likelihood of a mistake of this nature. Anybody can suggest a theory based on suppositions and conjectures, but it is a much more difficult task to support a theory of this nature. For evidentiary support we shall turn to third century Christian writer Tertullian, who many believe to be the father of Latin Christianity (www.tertullian.org). In his book *Adversus Marcion*, Tertullian writes, “Also it is well known that a census had just been taken in Judaea by Sentius Saturninus, and they might have inquired of his ancestry in those records” in regard to the birth of Jesus (Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion* 4.19). We are able to draw two very important points from this excerpt: the first is that Tertullian dates Jesus’ birth to time that Saturninus was governor of Syria (as previously mentioned, Quirinius took over the governorship from Saturninus in 7-6 BC); the second is that Tertullian has made a consignment error by assigning Quirinius’ 6 AD census to Saturninus.

This second deduction is extremely important because it shows that whatever transcription error was made by Luke, his source, or his copiers it occurred early enough to become engrained in multiple historical records. We can assume this, because Tertullian came up with the same consignment error regarding the census (the Quirinius census, that is), yet it was detached from the transcription error that caused Luke to confuse Quintilius with Quirinius. Furthermore, we can surmise that Tertullian used a source other than Luke to conclude that Jesus was born during Saturninus’ time as governor, because Luke does not cite Saturninus as the governor of Syria during Jesus’ birth – he cites Quirinius as governor (meaning to cite Quintilius as governor, at least according to this theory). Thus, if Tertullian were using Luke as a source (or at least exclusively Luke) he would have arrived at the same confused conclusion as Luke: that Jesus’ was born during Quirinius’ governorship in the time of his census. (As a side note, it is worth mentioning that Tertullian was, in all likelihood, inaccurate in reporting that Saturninus was governor at the time of Jesus’ birth, because Jesus was most likely born after Quintilius had replaced Saturninus as the governor (Rist, 489-490); nevertheless, that is an understandable error that Tertullian’s source (or probably Tertullian’s source’s source) could have made, given the short time frame and the slower speed at which information traveled in that day in age.)

Now that we have proven that Tertullian used at least one source other than Luke, it follows that either Luke's assignment error occurred early enough that it was embedded in Tertullian's other source before it had been compounded, or that Tertullian made the same type of error Luke did – by taking the non-confused (albeit wrong) data from his other source to conclude that Saturninus was governor at the time Jesus' was born, and incoherently combining it with the Quirinius' census reference from Luke, thus obtaining a brutally mutilated version of events, in which Saturninus adopts the Quirinius census and is left in his own (and correct) time period. Although the second option is certainly plausible, it seems far less likely than the first possibility (Luke's assignment error simply getting embedded in other sources early on). Tertullian (or an intermediary source) could have made the same type of error as Luke, but the odds of that are statistically much lower, because two multi-dimensional mistakes would introduce exponential possible outcomes (look into statistics – specifically combination and permutations – for a more detailed explanation on this).

Once the previous conclusion has been reached, one can assume that Luke did, in fact, make the transcription and assignment errors originally discussed, barring two circumstances: if there was actually an earlier census taken towards the end of King Herod's rule (refer to prior discussion on this for specifics) then Luke's only error was that of transcription (but not assignment); or, if there was both an earlier census and Quirinius held an earlier term as governor of Syria (as some suggest, although not Rist), then it is possible that Luke made neither a transcription nor assignment error. All said, it is evident that both this 'Rist-based' alternative theory and Professor Brindle's alternative theory are substantial enough to cause Smith's argument to fail the test of the Fink-standard doctrine.

Ultimately, I believe that the most historically accurate version of Jesus' birthdate narratives is that described in my presentation of the Matthaean model. Matthew's model harmonizes so smoothly with the non-canonical texts, while still allowing Luke to fit into the framework of the model – albeit with some significant modifications. This model is supported by numerous scholars, including Professor Brindle. Although Professor Smith's Lucan model has its strong points, I believe that the latter of the two explanations of Luke's Quirinius reference (the explanation suggested by John Rist, involving the Quirinius-Quintilius transcription assignment errors), when added to the reconstruction, completes the Matthaean model. All that said, I believe that the historical Jesus was born between late December of 5 BC and early March of 4 BC.

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