

Theology on the *Web.org.uk*

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

“CYRINUS THE GOVERNOR OF SYRIA”

ST. Luke and the Vulgate between them have transformed the original name of Quirinius into Cyrinus. The most interesting thing about Quirinius of course is his connexion with the census which was taken in Palestine at the time of our Lord's birth. This has been (and still is) the subject of much controversy (Luke, ii, 2). It seems worth while, without entering into this discussion, to give a sketch of the acknowledged facts of Quirinius's life—he was a very important man in his time, especially in the eastern provinces, and the census is not his only point of contact with New Testament history.

Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was probably born some time between 60 and 50 B.C. His family belonged to the little town of Lanuvium (now Lavigna) situated at the foot of the Alban Hills close to the Appian Way and about twenty-five miles from Rome. His family was not noble, but we have no evidence that they were poor. They were not connected by blood with the celebrated family of the Sulpicii, but one of these may have adopted Quirinius. We hear of some sort of relationship to another noble family, the Scribonii. It seems therefore risky to say that Quirinius was of humble origin. The eminent position to which he rose was however largely due to his ability as an officer and his hard work. Tacitus calls him a “tireless soldier.” Where and under what commander he served his apprenticeship in arms we do not know. Some time between 20 and 15 B.C. he probably held the office of praetor and it was no doubt soon after this date that he performed his first important military exploit, a campaign against two nomad tribes which dwelt in the Western Desert between Egypt and the Gulf of Sidra. He was very likely governor of Crete-Cyrene when he carried out this operation, but he may have done so at an earlier date as commander of one of the legions stationed in Egypt. No doubt it was some time in this period of his life that he married Appia Claudia Pulchra, a lady belonging to one of the most ancient and illustrious families of Rome. In 12 B.C. he became consul, one of the two eponymous or titular consuls of the year, a great honour for a man who was not of noble blood. His colleague in the consulship was his wife's brother, Messalla Appianus, who had married the emperor's niece and seemed to have a brilliant career before him. But Messalla died suddenly a few days after he and Quirinius had entered on their consulship, and his place was filled by Valgius Rufus the poet. Later in the same spring Marcus Agrippa, the foremost general of Augustus's reign, died in the prime of life.

After his consulship Quirinius was assigned a difficult military task in the East which had for years been waiting for some general, the subjugation of the wild Pisidian and Isaurian highlanders. In south-central Asia Minor the region of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium etc., the country of St. Paul's first missionary journey (Acts xiii, 14—xiv, 23)

had for many years been settling down into a peaceful and orderly land. South of it, on the nearest coast, the Pamphylian country, after a period of disorder was entering on a new prosperity. But between the two regions stretched a mountain-range rising to 8,000 feet, inhabited by lawless tribes whose raids made life and property insecure in the lowland towns. Persian and Greek kings had long counted them among their subjects, but no power had ever been able to impose order on them. Some twenty years earlier Amyntas the last king of Galatia had tried hard to do so, and had perished in the attempt. The most ferocious clan in these hills, the leaders in robbery and resistance alike, had their headquarters at a town or village called Homanada, situated where Pisidia merges into Isauria. Its site has not yet been identified, but no doubt it will be known some day, for after Quirinius's time it had a long peaceful history, and was eventually the seat of a Christian bishop. There must be substantial remains left. No doubt the Homanadenses, as they were called, headed a league or exercised an overlordship over most of the 200 miles of the mountain-range. They inhabited a steep-sided valley: Strabo's description of it makes one think of the Doone valley: "Their country lies amidst the heights of the Taurus, between precipices which are in most places impassable. Its centre is a deep-lying fertile plain, running up into several side-valleys. They used to cultivate this, dwelling on the heights above it, or in caves. But they spent most of their time in arms." If we can rely on this account, the most probable place is the marshy valley in which Lake Trogitis (now Sughla) lies, about fifty miles south-west of Iconium (Konya).

King Amyntas spent years in strenuous warfare among the mountains. In the western area he took several Pisidian strongholds reputed impregnable. On the eastern side he took Derbe, lying under the Isaurian mountains, and slew its despot, Antipater, a bad man who was in league with the brigands. Between these two points he overran and occupied the country of the Homanadenses, killed their chief, and drove them to their secret hiding-places in the rocks. To secure the territory he began to construct a great fortress, some five miles in circumference, at the southern entrance to their valley, on the towering hill-top of Isaura. Great portions of his splendidly built walls and towers remain to this day. But his course was cut short. The wife of the dead chieftain of Homanada apparently took command of the remnant of the tribe. She decoyed the king into an ambush, took him prisoner and avenged her husband by putting him to death. This was in 25 B.C. The Roman government made his large kingdom into the province of Galatia. The annexation was a kind of pledge that they would finish Amyntas's work, but fourteen years had passed and the highlanders seem to have largely recovered from the blows they had suffered, and to have ventured to renew their raids.

Quirinius was now sent out to finish the task, and he did so between

the years 11 and 7 B.C. He must have been provided with strong forces. Besides meeting with guerilla tactics he had to reduce a large number (perhaps forty-four in all) of mountain strongholds scattered probably over a long stretch of South Galatia. Some were of such natural strength that they had to be starved into surrender. The struggle must have been as tragic and ruthless as such "pacifications" usually are. At the end Quirinius had 4,000 prisoners, all that remained of the active male population of a wide area. Instead of selling them into slavery or sending them to be butchered in the amphitheatre, as was so often done by Roman generals, Quirinius acted more humanely and only deported them to the lowlands where they were taught or compelled to re-start life as orderly citizens. The future peace of the mountains was secured by the construction of fortresses and roads. Five military colonies were founded on their northern slopes. They stretched for 150 miles, from Olbasa in the west to Lystra in the east. Roads were planned, connecting these together and with the cities to the north, and other roads not long afterwards crossing the mountains to the coast. The work was probably planned by Quirinius and was already in progress in 6 B.C. but Quirinius had no doubt already gone. We hear little after this of disorders in these mountains. Fifty years later Paul and Barnabas were able to cross and recross them apparently without great danger. (Acts xiii, 14 and xiv, 23). They visited at least one of the military colonies, Lystra. As a mark of its gratitude Pisidian Antioch elected Quirinius to its chief magistracy, which he held by deputy.

What was Quirinius's official position during these years in the East? It has been usually thought that he was a governor of Syria, and that during the same period he took a census in Syria and Palestine, the census which coincided with our Lord's birth. This is certainly in accordance with the most natural sense of St. Luke's words (ii, 2) and with that of the usual translation. There are indeed difficulties both about date and also about administration, and the Isaurian country was separated from Syria by a broad strip of the Cappadocian kingdom which then reached to the Mediterranean. But all other solutions raise fresh difficulties which are at least equally grave. We cannot enter into this complex question here. If we assume that Quirinius was governor of Syria, the date of Christ's birth can hardly be later than 7 B.C. even if we suppose that the census was finished by his successor and that Palestine was left to the last. It is strange to think that the same man (under Providence) caused our Lord to be born in a stable and smoothed a way for St. Paul over the Pisidian mountains.

On his return to Rome Quirinius was awarded the right to wear on certain occasions the gorgeous robes of a triumphator. The triumphal procession itself was now restricted to members of the emperor's family. He may have spent the next five or six years at Rome. Some time before going out to Syria he had probably become closely acquainted with

the emperor's stepson Tiberius Claudius Nero, who became the next emperor, though nobody at this time expected that he would. Quirinius and Tiberius no doubt felt they had a good deal in common. Both were soldiers of the stern laborious old Roman type. In 6 B.C. Tiberius abandoned his public career in disgust, against Augustus's wishes, and retired to the island of Rhodes, where he spent seven years, half-forgotten and almost in disgrace. Many Roman officials in the East thought it prudent to ignore him, but Quirinius, either on his way back to Rome after the conquest of the Homanadenses or on his next journey to the East, visited Tiberius at Rhodes, at the risk of giving some offence to the emperor. The visit proves the independence of his character. Tiberius never forgot the act of kindness, for he made special mention of it many years later after Quirinius's death, and upon his accession he showed his gratitude by the special consideration and influence enjoyed by Quirinius.

In 1 B.C. Augustus sent his grandson Gaius Caesar aged nineteen, whom he intended to be his successor, to the East in order to prove his ability by settling the quarrel between Rome and the Parthian Empire, a quarrel chiefly about the choice of a king for Armenia. The young prince was accompanied by Marcus Lollius as his chief adviser and by a staff of distinguished men. If Quirinius was not at this time in the East, he must have travelled there with Gaius. The party visited Greece, then Egypt. Gaius seems to have been curious to see Herod's great new temple at Jerusalem, but in deference to Augustus he refrained from paying such an honour to an "oriental superstition," and went to Syria by sea. The middle course of the Euphrates formed the boundary between the two empires, and there on some day in A.D. 1 the Parthian king met Gaius and agreed to the Roman demands. Quirinius was no doubt present at the meeting. A young Roman officer who was also there, Velleius Paterculus, wrote a description of the scene nearly thirty years later. Roman and Parthian armies were drawn up facing one another on opposite banks of the river, while the two princes, each with a strictly equal retinue, met on an island in mid-stream to carry on their negotiations. During the festivities which followed the treaty the Parthian king disclosed and apparently proved to Gaius that Lollius had accepted bribes from the Parthians. This brought him under suspicion of treason. A few days later Lollius died, either crushed by the disgrace or, as some thought, by suicide. It was Quirinius who succeeded to the position of chief adviser to Gaius.

A party in Armenia refused to accept the king chosen by Rome, and it became necessary for Gaius and Quirinius to take a Roman army into that remote mountainous country. Gaius soon received a wound (in A.D. 2) which put him out of action and left Quirinius in sole command. Quirinius pushed on the war with his usual energy and had crushed all resistance before the end of the next year. He seems to have returned

to Rome immediately. Gaius never recovered and died in A.D. 4 on his way back. Augustus was left in his old age without any descendant capable of succeeding him, and decided to adopt his stepson Tiberius Nero, who had already returned to Italy, and to mark him as his successor. Tiberius Cæsar (as he now became) remained a firm friend to Quirinius as long as the latter lived. It was no doubt due to his influence that a "brilliant" marriage was now arranged for Quirinius, who had lost his previous wife by death or divorce. His new bride was a young woman of the highest nobility, Aemilia Lepida. She had been engaged to Augustus's younger grandson Lucius, who had died before Gaius. The marriage was an unhappy one. Quirinius was not much less than sixty, apparently a grave reserved man. His wife was scarcely twenty. If we may believe Tacitus, she was, or became, a bad character. Quirinius at any rate convinced himself that she had not only been unfaithful to him but had tried to poison him. A year or two after the marriage he divorced her and refused to acknowledge the child she had borne.

His mind was soon turned to more congenial objects, for the government found new work for him in the East. He was sent again to Syria as governor, with some important special tasks to perform. The complaints of the Jews had now induced Augustus to depose Archelaus who had received Judaea and Samaria as his share of Herod the Great's kingdom. Quirinius was to organize his territory as a small Roman province. In Armenia the royal family whom Quirinius had so lately established had perished, and another king was called for. Augustus had chosen a young Jewish prince brought up in Rome. He was descended on one side from Herod the Great and on the other from an Armenian princess. He is known to us under the name of Tigranes, a name perhaps assumed for this occasion, as it had been borne by past kings of Armenia. It was Quirinius's duty to help him with military force if it should prove necessary. He must also have been asked to raise troops in Syria to reinforce Tiberius's army which was fighting desperately with the revolted Pannonians (in Yugoslavia). Quirinius arrived in Syria in A.D. 5 or 6 and remained there for a period of two to four years. Armenia proved an easy task: the name of Quirinius was probably enough to overawe any would-be opponents. Tigranes was established on the throne without the use of any Roman force. The settlement of Judaea proved much more difficult. There now appeared an extreme Pharisaic party who asserted that for the Jews to submit to a pagan government would be not only a calamity but a sin. These were the men who afterwards became known as Zealots. They were led by one "Judas of Galilee" or "Judas of Gamala" whether fanatic or adventurer it is now hard to guess. His agitation was favoured by circumstances. In Syria the periodical census, taken usually every twelve or fourteen years, was now due, and Quirinius naturally decided that it should embrace the new province of Judaea as well as the various small principalities attached to the two

provinces. The main purpose of the census was to provide information for the assessment of the direct taxes paid to Rome, and it thus acquired a new meaning which the previous census (at our Lord's birth) did not possess: it was a visible sign of pagan rule, and was bitterly opposed by Judas's party. Moreover Quirinius was probably levying soldiers for Pannonia in all the pagan districts under his control, and although it had long been the custom not to enforce the Roman conscription on Jews, it may well have been feared and rumoured that in the present emergency the exemption would not be continued. It is not clear how much of the resistance was passive and how much was actual rebellion. It seems not unlikely that the strongest opposition was in the tetrarchies of Herod Antipas and Philip rather than in the new province, where Quirinius received valuable support from Joazar, the High Priest, who belonged apparently to the party which had asked for direct Roman rule. Quirinius was able after some delay to overcome the resistance and to complete his census. Before he left, a disagreement arose between him and Joazar. Quirinius removed the High Priest and appointed Annas in his place, the first time but by no means the last that a Roman governor made and unmade high priests. It was not in Palestine only that Quirinius had to put down disorders. An inscription found at Beirut shows that one of his officers Aemilius Secundus had both taken the census of the city of Apamea in northern Syria "at Quirinius's orders" and had also captured a stronghold of the lawless Itureans in the Lebanon. The inscription may however belong to his earlier governorship.

After his return from Syria till his death in A.D. 21 Quirinius probably remained in Italy. King Tigranes was soon driven out by the Armenians who disliked his Roman ways, and was perhaps not sorry to follow Quirinius to Italy and spend the rest of his days there. In A.D. 14 Tiberius became emperor, and his steady friendship made Quirinius one of the most influential men in the empire during his last years. He was also a man of great wealth. It was generally thought that he used neither his riches nor his influence to the best advantage. He was illiberal, if not miserly: we hear of no great building or public work made possible by Quirinius's generosity, nor of any act of clemency or kindness performed by Tiberius at his request. In A.D. 16 his relative Scribonius Libo Drusus, a silly and extravagant young aristocrat, who had dabbled in treason, was betrayed by pretended friends who had led him on. He was brought to trial, and when he saw that he would be condemned, he asked Quirinius to convey his last humble entreaties to the emperor. Libo received a cold non-committal answer from Tiberius and the same night he died by his own hand. Tiberius then said that he would have spared his life even if he had been condemned. We have the impression that Quirinius's intercession had been half-hearted. Very likely he thoroughly despised Libo.

At the very end of his days his hostility to his former wife Aemilia

Lepida breaks out afresh. After her divorce she had married the prominent orator Mamercus Scaurus, but after bearing him a daughter was now divorced from him also. She continued to treat her eldest child, probably a son, as Quirinius's, and it was this apparently that aroused Quirinius's rage. He seems to have suspected some design on his wealth. He had no children by any other marriage, and perhaps he feared that the large legacy which custom would compel him to bequeath to the emperor would eventually find its way into Lepida's hands—such legacies were often given away to relatives by both Augustus and Tiberius. At any rate he decided to destroy Lepida if he could. In A.D. 20 he not only accused her of false statements about the child, but he revived the charges of adultery and poisoning which he had made fifteen or sixteen years before but had not then brought into court. Some treasonable practices (which could be punished with death) were also urged against her. Not much can be said perhaps for Lepida. The best thing in her favour is the fact that her brother Manius Lepidus, a man of honourable and independent character, appeared as her defending counsel. As both Lepidus and Quirinius were friends of Tiberius, his sympathies were visibly divided. The revival of charges dropped so long ago naturally brought great odium on Quirinius, and Lepida did her best to aggravate this feeling. The trial was interrupted by some public holiday in the course of which there was a performance in Pompey's theatre, the largest in Rome. Adjoining the theatre was a great portico and other buildings including the hall in which some sixty years earlier Julius Cæsar had been murdered and had fallen by the pedestal of a statue of Pompey. This chamber had long been walled up as an accursed spot, but the statue had been moved to a conspicuous place in the auditorium of the theatre. Lepida was a great-granddaughter of Pompey. She came to the theatre clothed no doubt in mourning (as was the custom for persons on trial) and therefore very prominent in the festive crowd. As she passed the statue, she took the opportunity of bursting into tears in the sight of the assembled thousands, and called upon Pompey to witness the cruelty and injustice inflicted on her. The spectators were easily moved to weep with her, indignant that a noble lady who nearly became an empress should be sacrificed to please an upstart. The air was filled with abuse and curses directed against Quirinius. Whether he was present or not, he must have been deeply hurt at this manifest proof of his unpopularity. But Lepida cannot have improved her case by this scene. The charge of treason seems to have been dropped, but her slaves under torture gave incriminating testimony about the attempted murder and apparently about the adultery. Such evidence, of very doubtful value in itself, may or may not have been corroborated by other discoveries. In any case she was condemned and sentenced to banishment, but at Scaurus's plea she was spared from the confiscation which usually accompanied this sentence.

In the following year (A.D. 21) Quirinius died. The emperor himself asked for the honour of a state funeral for him and spoke warmly of his services and their friendship. Had he died ten years sooner, he would no doubt have been valued as he deserved for the great qualities which he certainly possessed, his energy, humanity and moral courage. As it was, men were more prone to remember his "mean and tyrannical old age." Velleius, who probably knew him well, and who moreover was anxious to pay compliments to Tiberius's friends, had several opportunities of mentioning Quirinius but never did so. His silence is a most eloquent testimony to the bad name that Quirinius left behind him.

W. REES.

NEW LIGHT ON OLD TESTAMENT PROBLEMS

RECENT WORK IN FRANCE.

THE Encyclical Letter, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, has indicated the direction that Biblical exegesis should take, especially for the Old Testament: "to remain sensitively faithful to the belief of our fathers in the Written Word of God, but at the same time to apply to it the most tried methods of textual and form criticism in order to understand and utilize it better."¹

The faithful should not be disquieted at the results of such methods when applied to the early chapters of Genesis. In a deeply interesting article, His Eminence Cardinal Liénart² has shown that there can be no contradiction between the Biblical cosmogony and the conclusions of science: science and faith, established on two different planes converge towards the one Truth: the revealed truth of Genesis and the results of human research harmonize, provided that we modify our interpretation and broaden its scope according to the established facts.

Besides, revelation and faith alone can enlighten us on the origin of life, of thought, of evil, of evolution and the direction it will take, of man constituted as such by the direct creation of the spiritual soul. Moreover, God intended to accomplish a work, even more marvellous in the order of grace.

This last fact enables us to grasp the meaning of the Old Testament. A. Gelin³ describes the leading ideas to be found there, as they develop, are purified and are deepened in the course of centuries and through the pressure of events, finally reaching their goal in Christ: the discovery

¹ A Robert, *Interprétation contemporaine de l'A.T.* in *Dict. de la Bible, Supplément*; (abbrev. D.B.S.). 1947 col. 636.

² *Le Chrétien devant les progrès de la science*, in *Etudes*, Dec. 1947, pp. 289-300.

³ *Les idées maîtresses de l'A.T.* (coll. *Lectio Divina*, no. 2, Paris, 1948, pp. 88.