

QUESTION: [Bart has said:] “Jesus must have been called the messiah during his lifetime, or it makes no sense that he would be called messiah after his death”: [Comment:] By this line of reasoning, then surely one would conclude that Jesus was considered divine during his lifetime, else it makes no sense he would be considered divine after his death?

RESPONSE: The first line in the question is a quotation of a view I have elaborated on the blog. The logic, in short (see the posts for a fuller explanation) is that no one on the planet expected that the messiah would die and rise again. And so even someone who came to believe in Jesus’ resurrection would never conclude: OH! He must be the messiah? That’s because that is not what the messiah was supposed to do.

The questioner then is arguing that the same thing applies to the question of Jesus’ divinity, that the resurrection would not make anyone think Jesus is divine. My view is that this is precisely wrong. It was the resurrection and nothing else that did make Jesus’ followers conclude that he was divine. The logic is clear and straightforward. The followers of Jesus did not think that Jesus’ body was merely reanimated (that he had some kind of near death experience), to die again later. They thought that Jesus had not only been raised back to life but that he had been exalted to heaven (since, well, he obviously was no longer here on earth).

And what did ancient people think of those who had been exalted to heaven? They thought they had become divine beings. That was true for pagans (think Romulus; Julius Caesar) and Jews (think Elijah and Moses). So even though resurrection/exaltation would never be thought to make someone the messiah, it is precisely what would make people think that Jesus came to be made divine.

QUESTION: I keep hearing people say that one of the decisive results of modern scholarship has been the realization that the Jewishness of Jesus is central to understanding him. Why was this ever in doubt?

RESPONSE: Ah, great question. There are lots of ways to answer it, depending on how one interprets the word “why.” Why did older scholarship (for centuries) deny Jesus’ Jewishness? One question is “what was the logic behind this older opinion?” and another is “what was driving the logic?” In terms of the logic, Christian scholars for centuries were convinced that Jesus was not a product of his Jewish environment but that he transcended it. Jesus, for them, completely transformed Judaism into a different religion, and so his preaching was not influenced by the Jewish world in which he was born but represented a radical reconceptualization of how a person relates to God. So he was not Jewish.

As to what was driving this logic, the short answer is: Christian supercessionism. Christianity, for most Christian scholars throughout history, was the true religion and Judaism was a false religion. The Jews were ignorant and hard-headed; Christians were enlightened and open to grace. Jesus came to abolish the primitive, legalistic Jewish religion to establish the true religion of love, mercy, and truth. And so Jesus could not be a Jew. He was the first Christian.

It was only after the Second World War that Christian scholars began to realize how completely wrong this view was. Jesus - like everyone else on the planet - was very much a

man of his time, and if you want to know what he taught and what he meant, you have to know the world within which he preached his message. And that was a world of first-century Palestinian Judaism.

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QUESTION: In your New Testament textbook, you write the following:

“Contrary to what Luke indicates, historians have long known from several ancient inscriptions, the Roman historian Tacitus, and the Jewish historian Josephus that Quirinius was not the governor of Syria until 6 C.E., fully ten years after Herod the Great died. If Jesus was born during the reign of Herod, then Quirinius was not the Syrian governor.”

I’m curious, Bart, as to how our conservative Christian friends reconcile this apparent discrepancy between scripture and history.

RESPONSE:

I frankly wasn’t sure of the answer to this question, and since I’m out of the country I don’t have any books around to find out. So I asked Ben Witherington, a leading evangelical Christian scholar, and he responded by sending along this paragraph that is to be published in his forthcoming commentary in the New Cambridge Bible Commentary series (a volume he is co-authoring with Amy Jill Levine). I give it here without comment.

No little ink has been spilt on **Luke 2.1-2**, in regard to the apparent mistake of suggesting that Quirinius was governor of the Syrian province (which included Judea at that point) when Jesus was born, since Jesus was born somewhere between 1-4 BCE not long before the death of Herod.^{[1][1]} This however depends on a particular kind of reading of the grammar of vs. 2, and in fact it is perfectly feasible to translate here “this registration happened first, (before) Quirinius was governor of Syria’.^{[2][2]} The reason for mentioned the latter is obvious enough—there was a famous or infamous census taken in A.D. 6 by Quirinius when he was governor of Syria, a census which helped precipitate a rebellion of some Jews against Roman rule. Head counts for the purpose of composing tax lists were always contentious matters in the Roman provinces and Judea was no different. While there is likely some rhetorical hyperbole in the reference to all the (known) world being enrolled, it is true however that Augustus did pursue a policy of taxation right across the imperial provinces of the Empire and Judea was part of an imperial province, so an enrollment is perfectly feasible. We know that in the Syrian province women as well as men were subject to the poll tax, and we know that in the parallel case in the province of Egypt people did go to ancestral or main homes to be enrolled, and thus there is nothing improbable about Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem together to be enrolled.^{[3][3]} Furthermore, as Acts 5.37 shows, Luke is perfectly well aware that the infamous census took place later, indeed after the time of Theudas the rebel.^{[4][4]}

^{[1][1]} On the date of Jesus’ birth see Witherington “Birth of Jesus,” in The Dictionary of

Jesus and the Gospels, (first edition, IVP,1992), pp. 66-68.

[2][2] A second grammatically feasible option is 'this registration became most important (later) when Quirinius was governing Syria'. See the detailed discussion in M.M. Culy et al. Luke. A Handbook on the Greek Text, (Baylor, 2010), pp. 64-65.

[3][3] See the detailed discussion of J. Nolland, Luke 1-9.20, pp.99-103 and all the bibliography there. It needs to be said that if Luke's veracity as a historian cannot be impuned on the basis of these verses, there are certainly no verses in the rest of the Gospel that are more historically problematic and more debated than these.

[4][4] On this text see Witherington, Acts of the Apostles, ad loc.



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