

Beyond the Alleged Contradictions: A Historical and Linguistic Harmonization of the Birth Narratives of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke

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Abstract:

The birth of Jesus Christ is a cornerstone of Christian teaching, serving as historical evidence and a solid foundation for theology, particularly regarding the chronological discrepancy between the reign of Herod the Great in the Gospel of Matthew and that of Quirinius in the Gospel of Luke. This article aims to critically and comprehensively analyze and compare the narratives of Christ's birth in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke to demonstrate that the narrative differences are not contradictory but can be harmoniously understood in light of each author's historical context and theological intent. Furthermore, it seeks to contribute to biblical theology literature and enrich apologetic discourse in addressing the challenges of the digital age. A qualitative literature review was employed to examine the chronology and context of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus' birth. The results of the analysis indicate that the chronological differences in the two Gospels are not contradictions. Rather, they reflect the theological emphasis and intended audience of each author. Linguistically, the term *πρῶτος* in Luke 2:2 can be interpreted as "before," and *ἡμέρας* in Matthew 2:1 refers to the reign of Herod the Great, which reinforces the historical accuracy of both Gospels. Support from Roman sources, the practice of the census under Augustus, and the rotation of Zechariah's priestly duties reinforce the possibility that Jesus was born in 6 or 5 BC, during the final years of Herod the Great's reign. Therefore, there is no basis for accusing the Gospels of contradiction.

Keywords:

contradiction, Gospels, Matthew, Luke, Birth, Jesus, herod, quirinius

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INTRODUCTION

Through His work of salvation, God demonstrates the greatness of His love for humanity and the universe. God willingly emptied Himself, taking on human form so that He might become like humanity (Phil 2:6-7). God's humanity is revealed through Jesus Christ, His only Son, whom He bestowed upon the world through the virgin birth of Mary. Christ was not born through marital relations; He did not come from mortal human seed, but from divine seed, namely, the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18). The birth of Jesus Christ is a fundamental pillar of Christian teaching, serving as evidence of a historical event and a solid foundation in theology, specifically, the doctrine of the Incarnation. The primary sources narrating this event are the two canonical Gospels: the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. However, based on these two primary sources, many biblical critics have exploited the chronological discrepancies between the two Gospels to challenge the authenticity of the Gospel narratives. In the Gospel of Matthew, the account of Jesus' birth is recorded as having taken place not long before King Herod the Great died or while Herod the Great was still ruling in Judea (Matt. 2:1), around 6 or 5 B.C. Meanwhile, in the Gospel of Luke, it is recounted that Jesus was born during the first census, when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:2), in the year 6 CE. Thus, there is a significant gap of 10 years between the dates of Jesus' birth as recorded in the two Gospels. This discrepancy raises serious questions about the accuracy of historical records and has even led to accusations of contradictions in the Gospel accounts regarding the year of Jesus' birth. Furthermore, these accusations have extended to issues concerning the inerrancy, inspiration, and divine origin of the Bible. Consequently, this has raised serious questions regarding the growth of the Christian faith. Therefore, it is necessary to examine these differences in order to address the allegations of contradictions between the two Gospels that record the historical narrative of Jesus' birth. In this study, the central questions are: Is there truly a chronological contradiction between the two Gospels? And how can attempts at harmonization be presented from both historical and theological perspectives?

The birth of Christ was different from the birth of a typical baby. Christ was born in a stable because the economic and political conditions at that time forced Joseph and Mary to give birth to Him in a way that differed from the birth of a typical baby. (Makadi, 2013). The story of Christ's birth began with a prophecy delivered by God (Gen. 3:15), which was then passed down through His chosen people until the time of Christ's birth (Dharma, 2024, p. 23). When humanity fell into sin, God promised that He would save humanity through a descendant born of a woman who would crush the devil. This was also prophesied by the prophets before the birth of Christ (Isaiah 7:14). The birth of Christ has become a significant moment for Christians, as evidenced by the annual celebration of His birth on December 25. However, behind the profound spiritual significance of Christ's birth lies a historical debate among academics and the public, particularly regarding the accuracy of the chronology of His birth as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. This issue demands critical analysis because it involves urgent aspects of theological studies specifically the Gospels and Christian apologetics. Skeptical thinkers such as Bart D. Ehrman argue that the story of Jesus' birth is a literary construction with a background that cannot be reconciled historically (Ehrman, 2009, p. 35). Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a comparative study approach to the two Gospels that serve as the primary sources for the chronology of Jesus' birth. In the context of this research,

the aim is to reconcile the narrative of Jesus' birth with historical records so that the narrative is not merely a religious document but also a record rooted in a specific historical and cultural context.

Current digital trends show that accusations of biblical inaccuracy are becoming increasingly widespread and viral through social media, anti-Christian apologetic videos, and online discussions that question the authenticity of the Gospels. Much of this content openly asserts that it is impossible for Jesus to have been born during the reign of Herod, who died around 4 BCE, and simultaneously during the reign of Quirinius, who began his census in 6 CE. For example, in a YouTube podcast titled "*Book Review: Bible Expose*," which has been viewed more than 58,000 times (Dondy Tan, 2025). The podcast features a convert named Dondy Tan alongside a host named Anton, who supports his claims. In the episode, Dondy Tan promotes his book titled *Bible Expose*, which he claims is the result of a critical analysis of various contradictions in the Bible. The book compiles a list of discrepancies between different parts of the Scriptures, including what he refers to as narrative contradictions in the story of Jesus' birth between the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. In the conversation, Dondy openly highlights the discrepancy between the reigns of Herod and Quirinius as evidence that Jesus' birth is not historically credible. He even states, with a tone of pride, that to date, no one has been able to provide a valid scientific rebuttal to the contents of his book. Content like this goes viral and has the potential to reinforce doubts among the general public, especially among those who lack a deep understanding of Gospel hermeneutics or the principles of biblical textual harmonization. Therefore, a comprehensive and well-reasoned academic response is needed to address this issue seriously in light of responsible Gospel theology.

Research on the birth of Jesus has been extensively conducted by previous scholars. For example, there is the study by Saputra and Siahaan titled "Matthew's Use of Isaiah 7:14 as a Messianic Prophetic Text Regarding the Birth of Jesus: An Intertextual Study." Their study found that Matthew also quoted Isaiah 7:14 to affirm Mary's virgin birth that is, Mary became pregnant without sexual intercourse with Joseph. The event experienced by Mary was the fulfillment of the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah; therefore, Matthew viewed it as a once-in-a-lifetime event (Saputra & Siahaan, 2024). The primary focus of this study is the theological aspects and intertextuality between the Old Testament and Matthew, not the chronology of Christ's birth. Furthermore, based on his analysis titled "A Historical Study of the Date of Jesus Christ's Birth," Marbun found that the celebration of Christmas to commemorate the birth of Jesus had already been observed 239 years prior to the 25th of Kislev in the year 274 CE according to the Jewish calendar, the 6th of January according to the Julian calendar, and December 25 according to the Gregorian calendar (Marbun, 2023). Although it makes an important historical contribution, this study does not directly address a narrative comparison between the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. While relevant, the aforementioned research has not specifically highlighted potential contradictions or discrepancies regarding the timing of Jesus' birth between the Gospels of Matthew and Luke using a comparative and hermeneutical approach to the Gospels. Thus, there remains a gap in the literature that needs to be filled: an in-depth analysis of the alleged contradictions regarding Christ's birth based on these two Gospel narratives, conducted systematically and apologetically, with a focus on the figures who ruled during the time period covered by both Gospels Herod and Quirinius. This study aims to

fill this gap by offering a comparative approach grounded in narrative, historical, and theological analysis.

Based on the background, phenomena, and research gap outlined above, Therefore, the purpose of this article is to critically and comprehensively analyze and compare the narratives of Christ's birth in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke to demonstrate that the narrative differences are not contradictory but can be understood harmoniously in light of the historical context and theological intent of each author. This study aims to contribute to biblical theology literature and enrich the apologetic discourse in the face of the challenges of the digital age. Through an in-depth literature review, this article argues that the reliability of the narratives of Christ's birth remains intact without having to negate the historical and theological dimensions of each Gospel.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using the library research method (Yusuf, 2017, p. 46), which focuses on an in-depth examination of texts and the interpretation of theological literature. Data were collected from credible secondary sources, such as the Bible, exegetical commentaries, academic theological journals, and books as well as websites that discuss the chronology and context of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus' birth. The discussion begins by analyzing the account of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Matthew through an exposition of Matthew 2:1, with an emphasis on the word *ἡμέραις* (hemerais), which refers to the reign of Herod, and an analysis of Herod as a significant historical figure. Next, an analysis of Luke 2:1-2 is conducted, focusing on the word *πρῶτος* (*πρῶτος*) and the census under the rule of Quirinius in Syria, which serves as chronological data that has sparked historical debate because it appears to be inconsistent with the reign of Herod. The final stage of the study involves a chronological comparison and theological synthesis to evaluate the chronological and theological coherence between the two Gospels, as well as its implications for understanding the historical account of Jesus' birth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An Analysis of the Narrative of Jesus' Birth in the Gospel of Matthew

Analysis of Matthew 2:1

The narrative of Jesus' birth recorded in the Gospel of Matthew is told in chapters one and two. In chapter one, the author outlines the genealogy and chronology of Christ's birth; subsequently, chapter two records the arrival of the Magi from the East, followed by the flight of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to Egypt, the massacre of infants under two years of age by order of Herod, and the return of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus from Egypt. To clarify the historical context of Jesus' birth, the Gospel of Matthew notes that these events took place during the reign of Herod the Great, a ruler who played a major role in the socio-political dynamics of Judea at that time.

Matthew 2:1, which reads, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the land of Judea during the reign of King Herod, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem," confirms the

narrative of Jesus' birth with a clear temporal marker. The phrase "during the reign of King Herod" is translated from the Greek: *ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἡρώδου τοῦ βασιλέως*. The lexical focus is on the noun *ἡμέραις* (hemerais), the feminine plural dative form of the root word *ἡμέρα* (hemera). This word corresponds to the Hebrew word יוֹם (yom), which literally means "day." However, in the New Testament, the use of the word *ἡμέρα* (hemera) does not always refer solely to the meaning of "day." In Koine Greek idioms, this term is also used in a figurative or broader sense, namely to denote a longer period of time. This is because the word *ἡμέρα* (hemera) has an implied connection to the word *ώρα* (hōra), which means "day," "hour," or "a specific time." This relationship indicates a semantic connection whereby *ἡμέρα* (hemera) encompasses a broader temporal dimension. *ἡμέρα* (hemera) is derived from the verb *ἠέμαι*, meaning "to sit," and shares a similarity with the root word *hedraios* (fixed or stable). From this root stems the understanding that "day" refers to something "calm" or "orderly," and in certain contexts is used to denote a broader "period of time" (*Bible Hub: Strong's Greek, 2250. ἡμέρα, 2025*). Therefore, the use of the plural form *ἡμέρα* (hemera) in Matthew 2:1 can be interpreted idiomatically as "era" or "period," that is, a span of time marked by the reign of a historical figure, in this case King Herod. This confirms that the narrative of Jesus' birth is not set in a mythological time frame, but rather in concrete history that can be traced through time markers recognizable to both Jewish and non-Jewish readers of that era.

Herod as a Historical Figure

Herod is one of the most famous figures in the Bible; even those with limited knowledge of the Bible will recognize the name and may have some idea of who Herod was. In fact, there were six different people in the New Testament who were part of the Herodian dynasty. From before the birth of Christ until the destruction of Jerusalem, the Herodian dynasty was the ruling family in Palestine. The Herodian family originated in Idumea, so they were considered by some Jews to be ineligible to sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem. However, the family's close ties to the Roman emperor of the time and to those who would become emperors allowed them to remain in power for nearly 100 years (Editors, 2017, p. 4). Of all the members of the Herodian dynasty, Herod the Great is the most famous figure in the chronology of Jesus' birth because of his tragic role in the attempt to kill the newborn Messiah.

Gaius Julius Herod, better known as Herod the Great, was one of the most famous Roman client kings. His reign, traditionally dated from 37 BC until his death in 4 BC (Czajkowski & Eckhardt, 2021, p. 1). He was born in southern Palestine as the second son of Antipater of Edom and Sipro of Petra. Although he was not of Jewish descent, he converted to Judaism under a mandate issued by John Hyrcanus of the Maccabean dynasty, which required all Idumeans to observe the Law of Moses following his conquest of Idumea between 140 and 130 BCE. Nevertheless, Herod affirmed his Jewish identity by marrying Mariamne, to whom he had been engaged for nearly five years, the young daughter of the Hasmonean king of Judea, after divorcing his wife Doris and exiling his three-year-old son, Antipater (Hutahaeian, 2021, p. 65).

Herod the Great rose to power in Judea following a period of political turmoil, particularly during the Parthian invasion of 40 BC. Amid the chaos, Herod fled to Rome after his father was poisoned and his brother, Phael, committed suicide. In Rome, he gained the support of Mark

Antony and Octavian, who subsequently nominated him to the Senate for the position of King of Judea (Richardson & Marie Fisher, 2018, p. 75). With the official sanction of the Senate and Roman troops under his command, Herod conquered the Parthians and reestablished his rule over Judea in 37 BC. His 34-year reign was marked by unwavering loyalty to the Roman Empire, which was clearly evident in his various monumental construction projects, particularly the massive renovation of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (Barton, 1996, p. 22). Nevertheless, despite his achievements, Herod ruled with a tyrannical grip. He was known as a paranoid ruler who did not hesitate to eliminate anyone he considered a threat to his power, including members of his own family. His policies had a devastating impact on his wives, Mariame and Doris; his sons, Antipater, Aristobulus, and Alexander; as well as his father-in-law and other close relatives (Sujarwo, 2022). His cruel, opportunistic, and paranoid leadership style demonstrated that Herod prioritized personal power and political relations with Rome over the well-being of his own people.

After a long reign marked by political tension, the attention of historians and theologians turned to the chronology of Herod's death, which is key to the historical reconstruction of Jesus' birth and the evaluation of the accuracy of the narrative in the Gospel of Matthew. Herod the Great died in 4 BCE at the age of 70 (Sujarwo, 2022); this is supported by Josephus, who noted that Herod's death occurred after a lunar eclipse. Herod most likely died after the total lunar eclipse observable from Jerusalem on September 15, 5 BCE, calculated from the date of his accession to the throne. However, if his reign is calculated as 34 years starting in 40 BC (excluding years with partial lunar eclipses), the majority of scholars believe he died in 4 BC, even though a partial lunar eclipse occurred on March 13 of that year. However, if Herod measured his reign from the start of his rule over the of Judea, he likely died in 1 BC, possibly after the total lunar eclipse visible from Jerusalem on January 9 or 10, 1 BC ("Herodes Agung," 2024).

The Gospel of Matthew states that Jesus was born before Herod's death, and therefore the date of Herod's death serves as the latest possible date for the Messiah's birth. According to Duyverman, there are chronological indicators suggesting that Jesus' birth occurred before the Magi's arrival in Jerusalem. Their presence at Herod's palace was certainly a formal affair and time-consuming, in keeping with the customs of banqueting and the presentation of honors in ancient Eastern culture. Furthermore, this process took a long time due to the participation of the chief priests and the scribes, who provided theological insight regarding the Messiah's place of birth (Matt. 2:4). This was followed by a secret meeting between Herod and the Magi (Matt. 2:7), their journey to Bethlehem, and the period between their quiet return and Herod's realization of it (Matt. 2:16). In short, these events unfolded over time. Therefore, Herod's decision to execute all male infants in Bethlehem aged two years and under, "based on the information he received from the Magi," indicates that Jesus' birth occurred approximately two years before Herod's death in 4 B.C. Based on this timeframe, it is highly likely that Jesus was born in 6 or 7 BC (Duyverman, 2017, p. 8). However, according to the Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, Jesus was born in 3 BC, a date widely recognized as the exact date of his birth. The data used for this calculation include: (1) the first census ordered by Quirinius (Luke 2:2), (2) Tiberius's accession in A.D. 14, (3) the Passover full moon that coincided with the crucifixion, presumed to have occurred in A.D. 33, and (4) the reign of Herod, which began in

36 B.C. and ended in 1 B.C. (*Bible Hub: Matthew 2 Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, 2025*).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that although Tiberius ruled his province starting in the year 14, he had already begun serving as *acting* ruler approximately three years earlier. This is because in those days it was not considered unusual to count the years *of acting rule*. Furthermore, Luke 3:23 does not specifically state that Jesus was exactly 30 years old. Rather, the verse states, “He was about thirty years old.” In this context, the word “about” should be understood to mean “more” rather than “possibly less, possibly more.” This is due to Jewish custom, which required that a person could only appear in public after reaching the age of 30 (Duyverman, 2017, pp. 7–8). Thus, it is entirely consistent for Jesus to have been born in 6 or 5 B.C.

Analysis of the Narrative of Jesus’ Birth in the Gospel of Luke

Analysis of Luke 2:1-2 and the Reign of Quirinius

In the Gospel of Luke, the story of Jesus’ birth is also recorded in two chapters, just as in Matthew. However, unlike Matthew, who places greater emphasis on prophecy and symbolism, Luke includes chronological and administrative elements that actually raise critical questions from a historical perspective. The account of Jesus’ birth in Luke 2:1-2 presents a rather complex historical dilemma, particularly regarding the census conducted during Quirinius’s governorship in Syria. Luke states that “*At that time Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria*” (2:1-2). According to the records of Flavius Josephus, Quirinius served as governor of Syria around A.D. 6, long after the birth of Jesus, which is thought to have occurred during the reign of Herod the Great, who died around 4 B.C. (Whiston, 2025). The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges also states that Quirinius served as governor of Syria in A.D. 6, ten years after that period, and claims that Luke made a ten-year error. However, the precise identification of the Quirinius referred to in Luke has not been fully agreed upon by historians, due to uncertainties regarding the form of his name and the timing of his appointment (*Bible Hub: Luke 2 Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, 2025*). Meanwhile, Barnes notes that Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until 12 or 15 years after Jesus’ birth (*Bible Hub: Luke 2 Barnes’ Notes, 2025*). This has sparked debate regarding the historical validity of Luke’s account. This temporal tension forms the basis for various harmonization strategies. Consequently, one must ask: Did Luke make a mistake, or is there an alternative explanation?

A commonly used method to resolve this tension is to interpret the word *protos* (πρῶτος) in the adjectival, nominative, feminine, singular form not as “first,” but as “before.” This is because in the New Testament tradition, the Greek term *protos* (πρῶτος) is generally translated as “first” or “chief” (*Bible Hub: Strong’s Greek: 4413. πρῶτος, 2025*). However, in certain contexts, especially when followed by the genitive case, *protos* can mean “before.” Examples can be found in John 1:15 and 1:30, where John the Baptist states that Jesus “was before me” (πρῶτός μου ἦν), indicating Jesus’ existence before John in a temporal context, not merely in the sense of primacy (*Bible Hub: John 1 Commentary - Cambridge Greek Testament*

Commentary, 2025). This usage is also found in Hellenistic Greek literature, including the works of Aristotle and Plutarch, which demonstrates that *protos* can convey the temporal meaning of “before” in certain contexts (*The Lukan Census: Part two*, 2025). Ellicott’s *Commentary* also states that the term translated as “first” has been interpreted as “before,” as translated in John 1:15 (*Bible Hub: Luke 2 - Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers - Bible Commentaries*, 2025). Vincent’s *Word Studies* also explains that the term refers to “the first enrollment made,” implying that a subsequent census took place afterward (Vincent, 2017, p. 256). This aligns with the passage in Acts 5:37, which refers to the second census conducted during the reign of Quirinius in A.D. 6, so the census mentioned in this verse is distinct from the second census. This understanding is crucial for interpreting Luke 2:2, which states that the census took place during Quirinius’s governorship in Syria. If “*protos*” is understood to mean “before,” the verse could be interpreted as, “*This census took place before Quirinius assumed office as governor of Syria*,” thereby aligning Luke’s narrative with historical records regarding Quirinius’s term of office. However, as criticized by the Cambridge Bible, this translation is entirely untenable and inconsistent with the use of the term in other verses, such as John 1:30 (*Luke 2, Bible for Schools and Colleges*). This interpretation is considered weak because Luke rarely uses the term in a temporal context as John does, and the context in Luke is more suited to referring to a specific event (*John Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible: Luke: Luke Chapter 2*, 2025). Consequently, although this solution simplifies the conflict, it is historically inaccurate and inconsistent with Luke’s narrative style.

Another possibility is that Quirinius held an administrative or military role in Syria prior to his official appointment as governor. Roman sources indicate that Quirinius was active in the eastern provinces before 6 CE. Tacitus notes that Quirinius served as an advisor to Gaius Caesar in Armenia before 4 CE (*Tacitus: Annals: 3 [40]*, 2025). Thus, the word *hēgemoneuontos* (*ἡγεμονεύοντος*), which is translated as “provincial governor” (LAI) or “governor” (BIS), does not refer to a specific technical term for the office of governor. Textual variants of the word *hēgemoneuontos* in the main manuscript traditions such as *the Codex Sinaiticus* (Ⲱ), *the Codex Vaticanus* (B), and *the Codex Alexandrinus* (A) consistently retain this form without significant variant apparatus (Aland, 2014, p. 210). Moreover, this is a broad term that can also refer to the office of procurator. Brown explains that the verb *hegemoneuein*, which is related to the noun *hegemonos*, is used to translate Latin titles such as *legatus* and *procurator*, with Syria being led by a *legatus* and Judea by a *prefectus* or *procurator* (Brown, 1993, p. 395). Josephus also explicitly refers to Quirinius as a procurator, not a governor, during the census, which indicates that the census took place before Quirinius’s appointment as governor of Syria in A.D. 6 (Whiston, 2025). Zumpt argues that Quirinius may have served as governor on two occasions, first in 4 BC when he initiated the census, and then in 6 AD when he completed it (Zumpt, 2021, p. 49). This view is supported by many contemporary scholars who seek to uphold Luke’s reliability as a historian, including Farrar, who asserts that there are no provable errors in Luke’s narrative (F. W. Farrar, 1874, p. 24). Ellicott’s *Commentary* also supports this: “*we may fairly look on St. Luke as having supplied the missing link... if not as praeses, then as quaestor or imperial commissioner*” (*Bible Hub: Luke 2 - Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers - Bible Commentaries*, 2025). If so, Luke was not mistaken in mentioning Quirinius’s involvement, but used the title “governor” anachronistically in the sense familiar to readers at the time he was writing

Another approach adopted by some interpreters is that this census was conducted in two stages: the registration stage and the tax collection stage. Prideaux and Whiston, in the Benson Commentary, assert that the census took place during Herod's reign (around 4-5 BCE), while tax collection occurred under Quirinius's rule around 6 CE: "*There were two distinct particular actions in this matter, done at two distinct and different times.*" Within this framework, Luke is considered to have combined these two events into a narrative sequence, rather than adhering to a strict chronological order. This interpretation, although not explicitly stated in the text, facilitates consistency between Luke and Josephus, who states that Quirinius only became governor of Syria after the deposition of Archelaus, the son of Herod (*Bible Hub: Luke 2 Benson Commentary*, 2025). Moreover, in the first verse, the word *apografesthai* the present, middle/passive infinitive form of *apografo* does not indicate that the registration or census occurred only once simultaneously throughout the Roman Empire. Hoehner explains that Luke uses the present tense to indicate that Augustus ordered the census to be conducted routinely, not just once. Therefore, it makes sense to believe that there was an order to conduct a comprehensive census during Augustus's reign (Hoehner, 1977). Ramsay also adds that the order from Augustus mentioned by Luke is generally interpreted as an order to conduct a census only once throughout the Roman Empire. This is an inaccurate interpretation of Luke's account. He uses the present tense, indicating that Augustus ordered the compilation of population lists on a routine basis, in accordance with the proper and conventional use of the present tense (Ramsay, 2005, p. 123).

Thus, a census in Herod's territory makes sense. This is because Roman authority over Herod the Great's territory was essentially unlimited, since he was merely a puppet king. According to Huebner, this suggests that a similar census based on the Roman model was most likely conducted in Herod's kingdom officially led by Herod but with military and administrative support from the Roman governor of Syria. As a vassal king, Herod depended on Augustus's support and was backed by him for legitimacy (Huebner, 2019, p. 44). Thus, it appears that the Romans could have conducted the census mentioned in the Gospel of Luke within the territory under Herod's control. Furthermore, the Roman government did not prohibit such a census. Huebner further explains that, in 6 or 5 BCE, Emperor Augustus and Herod the Great both demanded an oath of allegiance from anyone residing in Herod's territory (Huebner, 2019, p. 45).

Moreover, given Emperor Augustus's paranoid psychological state, conducting such a census would have allowed him to monitor every individual within his empire. Emperor Augustus may have intended to satisfy his vanity by counting his population and publicly announcing it to the world. Alternatively, he may have acted with political motives to strengthen his personal interests and enhance the effectiveness of the government, which he viewed as . Furthermore, during the reign of Emperor Augustus, records indicate that six censuses were conducted in Egypt (Bagnall & Frier, 2010, p. 5). Thus, Luke's account aligns with Emperor Augustus's practice of conducting repeated censuses to obtain accurate demographic information about the Roman Empire. In his autobiography, Augustus states that he conducted several censuses during his reign (Nggadas, 2021). Josephus also refers to the existence of "village scribes" in Judea during the reign of Herod the Great. These individuals served as property recorders for tax assessment during the census (Nggadas, 2021). Therefore, to claim

that there were no census records in Herod the Great's territory before 4 BC in order to contradict Luke's account is an inaccurate argument, since all supporting evidence consistently corroborates Luke's account. Thus, there is no contradiction; Jesus was most likely born between 6 and 5 BC, while Herod the Great was still in power and before the official census of Quirinius in 6 AD.

A Comparative Study and Synthesis of the Narratives of Jesus' Birth

The historical chronology of Jesus' birth is presented in the following table:

Event	Gospel Accounts	Historical Evidence	Estimated Year
Reign of Herod the Great	Matthew 2:1 refers to Herod the Great as king at the time of Jesus' birth	Josephus records that Herod died around 4 BC following a lunar eclipse	37-4 BC
Birth of John the Baptist	Luke 1:5 mentions the priest Zechariah of the division of Abijah	The Jewish priestly rotation indicates that Zechariah served around 7-6 BC	7-6 BC
The Announcement to Mary	Luke 1:26-38, six months after Elizabeth conceived	Consistent with the chronology of John the Baptist	± 6 BC
The Birth of Jesus in Bethlehem	Matthew 2:1 and Luke 2:1-7	Occurred while Herod was still alive	± 6-5 BC
The Census of Augustus	Luke 2:1	The Romans conducted periodic censuses in various provinces	End of Herod's reign
The Involvement of Quirinius	Luke 2:2	Quirinius likely held an administrative position before 6 AD	Before 6 AD
The Magi arrived	Matthew 2:1-12	Indicates that Jesus was born before Herod's death	± 5-4 BC
The Massacre of the Innocents	Matthew 2:16	Consistent with Herod's paranoid	Around 4 BC

		character as recorded in history	
The Death of Herod the Great	Implications of Matthew 2	Josephus records Herod's death around 4 BC	4 BC
The official census of Quirinius	Acts 5:37	Josephus records the official census of Quirinius in 6 AD	6 AD

The accounts of Jesus' birth in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke offer different yet complementary perspectives on the Incarnation. The Gospel of Matthew emphasizes the politico-religious context by situating Jesus' birth during the reign of Herod the Great (around 6-4 BC) and documenting the visit of the Magi and the flight to Egypt as elements of power dynamics. In contrast, the Gospel of Luke emphasizes the administrative and social dimensions, referring to the Roman census associated with Quirinius and depicting the birth of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah. Theologically, Matthew portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy (Micah 5:2), while Luke portrays Jesus as a universal Savior who emerged within the framework of the Roman Empire, for both Jews and non-Jews. To gain a deeper understanding of the historical harmony between Matthew and Luke, it is important to examine the chronological issues that are often highlighted by interpreters.

The apparent chronological discrepancies in the two narratives have been the subject of historical study, particularly regarding the historical roles of Herod the Great and Quirinius. Herod is known to have died in 4 BCE, while Quirinius officially took office as governor of Syria in 6 CE. However, several approaches can reconcile this tension. A number of historians have suggested that Quirinius held an administrative or military role in the Eastern provinces prior to his official term of office. Furthermore, Roman censuses were often conducted in stages rather than simultaneously across all provinces, making it highly likely that registration in Judea began earlier (Emil Schürer, 1973, pp. 399–402). Linguistically, the Greek term *protos* in Luke 2:2, which is often translated as “the first,” can also be read as “before” (Bauer et al., 2021, pp. 892–893), so the census in question could refer to a preliminary registration that took place before Quirinius formally assumed office.

Thus, the narrative differences between the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are not an indication of historical contradiction, but rather a reflection of the differing perspectives and theological purposes of each author. Matthew, who wrote primarily for a Jewish audience, emphasizes the connection between Jesus and the prophetic heritage as well as the challenges posed by Jewish rulers such as Herod. In contrast, Luke constructs a narrative rooted in the sociopolitical structure of the Roman world, which is more accessible to non-Jewish readers. Both authors affirm that Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod, though with different emphases: Matthew emphasizes continuity with Israel, while Luke highlights the inclusivity of the Messiah's mission.

One of the key narrative elements in establishing the chronological framework of Jesus' birth is the account of John the Baptist's birth in the Gospel of Luke. Luke provides additional chronological details regarding the birth of John the Baptist that relate to the ministry of the priest Zechariah in the Temple. Zechariah was part of the division of Abijah (1 Chr. 24:10), which, according to tradition, served on a rotating basis every six months. Through an analysis of the priestly rotation system and the era of Herod, many scholars estimate that Zechariah's ministry took place around 7-6 BC, placing John's birth at the end of 6 BC or the beginning of 5 BC (Sutama, 2008, pp. 5–6). Luke mentions that Jesus was conceived about six months after John (Luke 1:36), making it possible to place Jesus' birth in the middle to late 5 BC, consistent with the reign of Herod the Great.

Taking into account all of this narrative and historical data, it can be concluded that although there are differences in writing style and emphasis on details, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke still provide consistent testimony regarding Jesus' birth during the final years of Herod the Great's reign. The assumption that Jesus' birth occurred around 6 or 5 BC aligns with historical records and the narrative structure of both Gospels. The census mentioned by Luke most likely refers to a registration process that had begun before Quirinius officially assumed the office of governor of Syria. Meanwhile, the account of John the Baptist's birth found exclusively in Luke helps reinforce this timeframe through its connection to the priestly service of Zechariah. Conversely, the assumption that Jesus was born during Quirinius's official term in 6 CE implies an implausible time gap between the angel's announcement and Jesus's birth. Chronologically, this poses a serious difficulty, as it implicitly requires that Mary was pregnant for more than a decade from the time of Zechariah's ministry until Quirinius became governor of Syria. Such a hypothesis is inconsistent with the narrative structure of the Gospel of Luke, which clearly states that Mary's conception occurred immediately after the angel Gabriel's announcement (Luke 1:26-38). Thus, the narrative differences between Matthew and Luke are not a contradiction, but rather a theological contribution that enriches our understanding of the context of the Messiah's birth both from the perspective of the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy in Matthew and from the perspective of the universality of salvation in Luke.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that the narratives of Jesus' birth in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, although they have chronological differences, are not contradictory but rather two complementary historical-theological perspectives. Matthew emphasizes Jesus' birth within the political context of Judea under Herod the Great around 6-4 BCE, while Luke presents an administrative narrative by referring to the census conducted while Quirinius held administrative responsibility in Syria. Linguistically, the term *πρῶτος* in Luke 2:2 can be interpreted as "before," and *ἡμέραις* in Matthew 2:1 refers to the period of Herod the Great's reign, which reinforces the historical accuracy of both Gospels. Support from Roman sources, the practice of the Augustan census, and the rotation of Zechariah's priestly duties reinforce the likelihood that Jesus was born in 6 or 5 BC, toward the end of Herod the Great's reign. Thus, a proper interpretation of the text and context of each Gospel actually reveals narrative coherence and enriches the theological understanding of the Incarnation, rather than serving as a basis for accusing the texts of contradiction. This study affirms that the biblical narrative possesses

historical and theological reliability that can be upheld in both academic discourse and apologetics.

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