

# Letters

and thus more conventional insights of the various fields: biological evolution, cognitive psychology, scholars of ancient India and ancient China, religious studies. Thus, it may well be that cutting-edge scholars in any (and perhaps all) of these fields might disagree with the research he is drawing from. Perhaps in biology the emergentists might find fault, in psychology the enactivists might quarrel, religious studies scholars might question the Buddha's existence, or argue for the invention of world religions during the romantic period, or even question whether there actually were axial turns. However, Bellah's genius is not that he goes to new and daring paradigms to make his case, but that he brings together the best of traditional scholarship into a new synthesis, telling a plausible story about how religion might have emerged in human biological and cultural evolution. In it, he resituates religion, away from being reactionary and outmoded, requiring eclipse, toward understanding religion as part and parcel of the warp and woof of being human.

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## Evidence for an Earlier Nativity

James A. Nollet, "Astronomical and Historical Evidence for Dating the Nativity in 2 BC" (*PSCF* 64, no. 4 [2012]: 211–19), offers his reading of evidence to support the date of 2 BC for the Nativity. There are alternative readings of the available evidence.

### *The Census in Luke*

According to Luke 2:1–3:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. (NIV)

But according to Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.1–2), Quirinius took the census in AD 6. During this census, Judas of Galilee caused a disturbance (Acts 5:37). According to Josephus (*War* 7.253), "Judas ... induced multitudes of Jews to refuse to enroll themselves when Quirinius was sent as censor to Judaea."

The passage in Luke presents several serious problems. It is argued that

1. There is no evidence of a universal census taken at the same time in the Roman Empire.

2. A Roman census could not have been carried out during the reign of Herod, a client king.
3. Under a Roman census, Joseph and Mary would not have been required to travel to Bethlehem.
4. Josephus does not refer to a census during Herod's reign, but does refer to the noted census under Quirinius in AD 6 (*Antiquities* 17.355; 18.1–2, 26).
5. A census under Quirinius could not have been held under Herod, as Quirinius was not a governor until later.

To these objections, conservative scholars have responded:

1. Luke's language is hyperbolic. It is significant that Augustus initiated periodic empire-wide censuses in Italy and in the provinces, which were carried out in different ways at different times. Edict III from Cyrene in Libya refers to a census dated to 4 BC.
2. After 8 BC, Herod had fallen out of favor with Augustus, who no longer treated him as a "friend" (Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.290–3). It was therefore possible that the Romans required a new census.
3. Unlike the case in Egypt, in Syria (including Judea) women were to be enrolled also. A reference in Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.20) records that Jesus's family at the time of Domitian possessed land in Bethlehem. The requirement for Joseph to return to his ancestral home in Bethlehem has been illustrated by an edict of G. Vibius, the prefect of Egypt (AD 104), which reads,

Because of the approaching census it is necessary for all those residing for any cause away from their own districts to prepare to return at once to their own governments, in order that they may complete the family administration of the enrolment ...

Another parallel is a document from Babatha, who was one of the Jews who fled during the Bar Kochba Revolt (AD 132–135). In 127 Babatha recorded that she traveled to declare her possessions before the Roman commander at Rabbath-Moab because "a census of Arabia was being held."

4. An earlier census may not have interested Josephus, as much as the more important census of AD 6, which started events which culminated in the great Jewish War, which was the focus of his histories.
5. Some have argued that the Greek term referring to Quirinius may not necessarily mean that he was the "governor" of Syria, but may refer to his role as an administrator in the area. However, attempts to appeal to a broken inscription that some have

ascribed to Quirinius governing iterum, that is, a second time in the area of Syria, prior to his well-attested term which began in AD 6, appear to be unconvincing. We also have a full list of governors of Syria; C. Sentius Saturninus was the governor between 10/9 and 7/6 BC, followed by P. Quinctilius Varus from 7/6 to 4 BC.

Though it is not the obvious meaning of the term, the Greek word *prōtē* translated “first,” may have the sense of “prior” in a comparative sense, indicating that the census at the time of Jesus’s birth was prior to the more famous census under Quirinius.

## *The Eclipse and Herod’s Death*

The author’s contention that the eclipse in 4 BC was probably not the eclipse to date Herod’s death, as it occurred late at night when most would be asleep, might seem, at first, a persuasive one, but it is a specious argument. Night watchmen could have observed such an eclipse.

For his purposes, the author cites the authoritative work on chronology by Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (1998), but he ignores Finegan’s charts (Tables 140 and 141), which clearly indicate that Herod’s regnal years ended in 4 BC. In order to support a later death, the author has to resort to the possibility of antedating by Herod’s successors.

The author cites (n. 31), an article from *Chronos, Kairos, and Christos II* edited by Jerry Vardaman. I was the co-editor with Professor Vardaman of *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989) [hereafter cited as CKC I], to which Ernest Martin contributed a chapter, “The Nativity and Herod’s Death.” The consensus for that work dated Herod’s death to 4 BC and was represented by Paul L. Maier, “The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus’ Life.” See also Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977).

## *The “Star” of Bethlehem*

There have been innumerable suggestions as to the “star” of the Nativity (see my “The Magi Episode,” CKC I, 15–39). Ernest Martin considered the star to be the planet Jupiter, as did Konradin Ferrari-D’Occhieppo, emeritus professor of astronomy at the University of Vienna, in his chapter, “The Star of the Magi and Babylonian Astronomy” (CKC I, 41–53). Jerry Vardaman, “Jesus’ Life: A New Chronology” (CKC I, 55–82), on the basis of his identification of the star with Halley’s comet, dated Jesus’s birth to 12 BC!

More recently, two scholars have identified the star with a comet observed by the Chinese in 5 BC. See Colin Humphreys (Cambridge University), “The Star of Bethlehem—a Comet in 5 BC—and the Date of the Birth of Christ,” *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 32 (1991): 389–407; see also James Sentell, [BLOG\\_POSTedit20a.pdf](#) (31 pages with data from the Jet Propulsion Lab). Among points with which I would disagree with Sentell is my persuasion that the Magi were Babylonian astrologers (see my *Persia and the Bible* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990], chap. 13, “The Magi”).

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## **Dating the Birth of Jesus from the Star of the Nativity**

I read with interest the article by James A. Nollert entitled “Astronomical and Historical Evidence for Dating the Nativity in 2 BC” (*PSCF* 64, no. 4 [2012]: 211–19). The author goes into great detail discussing the available historical events regarding names of governors, two Roman censi, and lunar eclipses that occurred during the period 4–2 BC. Doing so, he tries to show that Herod died in 1 BC, or even AD 1, contra the commonly accepted date of 4 BC. If so, Christ’s birth would have occurred within 3–2 BC.

There are a number of astronomical arguments regarding the nature of the star of Bethlehem during the period 5–2 BC. A few astronomers mention a “recurring nova” recorded by the Chinese in 5 BC, which then reappeared a year later, thus setting Christ’s birth circa 4 BC. If, however, Christ’s birth was in 3–2 BC, astronomical calculations would point to the star of Nativity as a conjunction of planets (not a nova, supernova, or a comet). As reported in *The Christmas Star* by John Mosley in 1988, and illustrated by Clay Frost (see [msnbc.com](#), “That Christmas ‘Star of Wonder’ still leaves plenty to wonder about,” [http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/MSNBC/Components/Interactives/Technology\\_Science/Space/Star-of-Bethlehem/star.swf](http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/MSNBC/Components/Interactives/Technology_Science/Space/Star-of-Bethlehem/star.swf) [click on image] updated 12/24/2012), it is said that there were nine major conjunctions that took place in the period from 3 BC to 2 BC.

But on August 12, 3 BC, there occurred a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter that would have had particular significance to astrologers who were also acquainted with the book of Daniel. It occurred between Venus and Jupiter in the constellation of Leo, near the star