
Counted!

Bible Reference: Luke 2.1-7

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We imagine a Roman census-official, Regulus, and his wife, Julia, in Bethlehem. In general, the Romans cared little for their subject races – and what was it like for their wives? The drama follows the assumption that the real purpose of the census was for taxation purposes. We tend to think today in terms of computers and databases, and of a very mobile population. None of these were part of the ancient scene. The taxation system couldn't be centralised. It depended on an organisation of geographical areas and efficient tax-collectors who forwarded the right proportion of their "takings" to Rome. The census information would be needed locally. The Jewish insistence on being counted by their traditional tribal and family groupings would have seriously affected the usefulness of the information to the Romans! And were babies really counted? That, of course, is a guess – based on the fact that Mary (as well as Joseph the breadwinner) had to be registered (Luke 2.5). What we do know is that Jesus came as part of our history. It is an interesting speculation that, if all the records of Rome were available to us, his name would be recorded in this census as well as later in the record of crucifixions.

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Counted!

It was one of those beautiful Bethlehem evenings and Regulus and his wife Julia sat gazing into the star-studded sky. It had been weeks since they had the time to do this, but now at last life would be a little easier.

JULIA: It's not fair, Regulus. It's all right for the Emperor in his nice palace in Rome, with lots of slaves to do all the house-work. Then he brings in his musicians, calls in a feast or goes out to the sports. And my Regulus gets stuck out here in Bethlehem...

REGULUS: My dear Julia, I'm told there are much worse places than Bethlehem!

JULIA: The Jewish ladies wear such tiresome dresses. The food in their markets may be nutritious, but I've got a craving for some nice Roman delicacies! The night air is fresh enough but spoilt by the sound of timbrels and chanting. And the locals objected so strongly when I wanted my little image of Jupiter at the front door...

REGULUS: There would have been a riot, my dear. Feelings are so strong about religion in these parts!

JULIA: And why would the Emperor want to know how many of these pesky Jews there are, anyway? wearing out my Regulus while he lives in luxury in Rome!

REGULUS: I'm just a Public Servant, Julia. Officially I don't know the answer to your question, but I suspect the local rumour is true enough – the census has to do with bringing in more taxes. If that's right, we shouldn't complain too much, because that helps to pay us!

JULIA: But the people have come ridiculous distances to be counted! Not that I'm worried for their sake – they're just Jews, after all! But it's made your job so complicated!

REGULUS: Not half as complicated as it will be when the tax-collectors have to use this information!

JULIA: I hadn't thought of that!

REGULUS: I don't think it was what the Emperor really had in mind when he ordered everyone to "go to his own town". I suspect he wanted everyone in the Bethlehem tax-area to come into Bethlehem to be counted, and so on. Then the names and figures would have been just right for the local tax-collectors to work on. Instead, they've come here from everywhere!

JULIA: Something to do with the quaint stories about their old King David, you think? They call this place his city, you know.

REGULUS: I suppose so. But I reckon it has trebled my work, and lightened the load for some other census officers!

JULIA: And Regulus – did you have to count everybody? and I mean everybody, even the little children?

REGULUS: Everybody, Julia – the Emperor doesn't miss anyone! You know, we even counted a new-born baby!

JULIA: Not really?

REGULUS: Why not? This couple had come all the way from Nazareth...

JULIA: That's a long way for a pregnant woman, Regulus!

REGULUS: Just another Jew, of course!