Intermezzo: Roman Reversionism: Jeffers's "Religion in the Greco-Roman World"; Rome's Moral Decline & the Augustan Census, Luke 2:1–5; Mic 5:2; Divine Omniscience Coordinates the Virgin Birth with Historic Events; Augustus Appoints Himself Pontifex Maximus

I. The Intermezzo

Intermezzo is a term describing an interlude between acts of a play or major sections of an opera. It is also used to describe any brief interlude or diversion and on this occasion it applies to the "historical concept of freedom" during the Incarnation of Christ.

The Lord spoke about freedom in John 8 while teaching at the temple's court in Jerusalem. It was here that He clearly presented Himself as Messiah which the Pharisees challenged due to their unbelief. Nevertheless, during his discourse He asserted that He was the Anointed One on four occasions: **(1)** "I am the Light of the world," John 8:12, **(2)** "I am from above," v. 23, **(3)** "the Son of Man," v. 28, and **(4)** "I am," v. 58.

These statements contained powerful assertions of Messiahship but according to John 8:20, "no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come."

Yet, He appeared at a time that Paul defines in:

> **Galatians 4:4 -** But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law,
>
> **v. 5 -** so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.
>
> **v. 6 -** Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"
>
> **v. 7 -** Therefore, you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

At the virgin birth, the religious and political environment into which the Lord entered was defined by the acceptance of virtually any and every god from the broad spectrum of cultures that made up the Roman Empire.

Caesar Augustus saw this as a problem and thus created the cult of emperor worship. The development of this state religion coincided with the First Advent and the dispensation of the Incarnation. It was a time of transition in SPQR when acceptance of varied religions throughout the Empire was transformed over to a demand to show homage toward Caesar.

II. Roman Reversionism

The background for early Christianity must include the religious worldview of the Roman Empire. The following overview provides a brief synopsis that describes the development of emperor worship begun by Caesar Augustus.

> **Most residents of the Roman Empire looked at religion differently from the way most religious Americans do today. While Americans for the most part prefer to keep religion separate from the state, the ancients saw the state as inseparable from religion. The Romans on the whole took religion very seriously.** (p. 89)

Because they accepted the existence of many gods, Romans usually were tolerant of other religions, even when they considered them distasteful. But they became intolerant, even repressive, when they feared that a religion threatened their way of life. (pp. 89–90)

By the time of Jesus and Paul, philosophers had long questioned the existence of the official gods. Political leaders, even the priests of these gods, were often motivated more by social and political goals than by personal religious belief. The common people of the Empire often were more interested in the local or minor deities of their areas than in the gods of the official state religion. (92)

At first the Romans did not think of their gods as persons with histories and human passions, but Etruscan and Greek influence changed this. Once Rome came into contact with the Greek colonies of southern Italy, the Romans began fusing much Greek religion with their own. But they never placed as much emphasis on the human aspects of the gods as the Greeks did. The Romans believed, as did most polytheists of the day, that there was always room for one more god. They were never sure that they had discovered all the gods that existed. (94)

The state religions of the Greeks and Romans proved unsatisfying for some. Those who longed for a sense of salvation, and for a more personal connection with a deity, often looked for them in the mystery religions.

Nearly every region of the Mediterranean world had its own mystery religion. The mystery religions had little use for doctrine or argumentation. Instead, and in addition to their desire for redemption, they emphasized the pursuit of a sense of oneness with their god and ultimately the attainment of immortality. (p.96)

In general, the Romans readily accepted foreign deities. From the third century B.C. on, many Romans began adopting new religions. This was in part because things had not been going well for Rome in its wars against the Carthaginians, and many felt the need to seek additional divine help. (p. 98)

The late Republic brought a change of attitude toward the Roman state religion. While Romans continued to build massive temples to the traditional gods, the educated and wealthy classes began to doubt the existence of the gods. The ruling elite did not give up the state religion; that would have been impossible since it was so intertwined with the politics of Rome. But offices such as that of the high priest of the state religion became purely political offices, sought after by political climbers like Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus. Many of the elite turned privately to astrology for guidance, even while they maintained public worship of the Roman gods.

Some Romans attributed the civil wars at the end of the Republic to this loss of commitment to the traditional gods. The first emperor, Caesar Augustus, sought to validate his rule by presenting himself as leading Rome back to its long-lost roots. He stressed the ancient Roman belief that prosperity and peace depended on fulfilling one's duties to the gods. He began a systematic religious restoration. In Rome alone he restored eighty-two temples, reinstituted many forgotten rites and festivals, and filled vacant priestly offices. He attempted to limit the intrusion of new cults into the city of Rome.

> **For Augustus this was not about restoring religious faith and practices; it was about using Roman tradition to mask his assumption of power that no one person had held before. Because of this, he made a number of changes to Roman religion designed to weaken or eliminate the independent power of religious leaders. For example, he (and his successors) assumed the post of high priest (*pontifex maximus* [the chief priest of the Pontifical College in Rome]). He deprived the priestly colleges of their influence over political decisions. Instead, the colleges were reoriented to serve the emperor.** (p. 100)
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> **While Augustus was primarily concerned with reestablishing traditional religious practices, he did contribute one important religious innovation: the cult of the emperor. Emperor worship was a way for Roman leaders to establish their power in the eastern Mediterranean. It also served to focus the loyalty of provincials on the person of the emperor. This cult was readily accepted by those peoples of the eastern Mediterranean who for centuries had been taught to venerate their rulers as gods.** (pp. 100–101)
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> **During the first century A.D., the cult of the living emperor became an accepted feature of public life. Oaths were sworn by the genius of the emperor. The Greek term *kyrios* ("lord") was used to refer to the emperor Nero.** (p. 101)
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> **The Romans did not require anyone to worship only the emperor; they allowed people to retain their own religious beliefs. This caused a problem for the vast majority of subjects, who believed in many gods. Only the Jews and Christians had serious religious problems with emperor worship.** (pp. 101–2)
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> **The Jews could not worship the emperor without violating the exclusivist requirements of their religion. Fortunately, they had been granted a special exemption from emperor worship.**
>
> **Christianity benefitted from the Jewish exemption as long as it appeared to be a sect of Judaism, but it was never granted its own exemption from emperor worship. For the most part the act of emperor worship was voluntary and could be avoided by Christians.**[1] (p. 102)

The Lord entered into human history at a time of emperor worship instituted by Caesar Augustus, the Empire's first emperor whose reign lasted from 27 B.C–A.D. 14. Paul informs us this was the fullness of time which refers to the complete failure of religion, including Judaism, up to the point of the Virgin Birth.

III. The Augustan Census[2]

Rome was willing to absorb any religious figure in addition to its pantheon that itself included a host of alleged deities. The intervention of the God of the universe into the metaphysical smorgasbord of idols, sacrifices, and political intrigue changed the world and intensified the Angelic Conflict.

> **Luke 2:1** - Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

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[1] James S. Jeffers, "Religion in the Greco-Roman World," chap. 5 in *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 89–102 passim.
[2] My commentary in the following paragraphs is guided by references to Paul L. Maier's *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1991).

> **v. 2 -** This was the first census taken while Quirinius \kwī-rin'-i-us\ was governor of Syria.
>
> **v. 3 -** And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city.
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> **v. 4 -** Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David,
>
> **v. 5 -** in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.

Note that the first person mentioned in Luke's account of the first Christmas was Caesar Augustus who made a decision in Rome that set off a sequence of events that took Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem and the subsequent birth of Messiah.

The omniscience of God is clearly in view here. He perceived in advance the emperor's decree for a census which required coordination of the virgin pregnancy, the timely arrival of the holy couple at Bethlehem for the virgin birth, and the fulfillment of Micah's prophecy in:

> **Micah 5:2 -** "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.

The emperor's decree applied to Joseph and Mary because of a critical battle between Rome and Pontus about sixty years before. Roman general, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus \g-nī'-us päm-pē'-as mag'-nas\ or Pompey the Great, defeated Mithradates \mith-ra-dā'-tēz\ the Great, king of Pontus, after which Pompey annexed both Syria and Palestine into the Empire.

In 63 B.C., Pompey took Jerusalem and made Judea a vassal kingdom. Julius Caesar appointed Herod Antipater procurator of Judaea in 47 B.C. Antipater's son, Herod the Great, was made governor of Galilee and then tetrarch of Judaea in 41 B.C., serving until his death in A.D. 4. He is mentioned in Scripture only in the accounts of the magi in Matthew 2.

By the year 5 B.C., the approximate year of the Lord's birth, Augustus had assessed the Zeitgeist of the Empire and determined that it needed a religious revival. Romans had abandoned the worship of the various gods of Roman and Greek mythology in favor of the mystery cults practiced among Greek and other immigrants.

The result of this shift in religious emphasis caused Roman traditions to be exchanged for licentiousness and Augustus wanted to reverse this trend. His efforts to influence a return to Roman standards included the restoration of over eighty temples in Rome and he appointed himself *pontifex maximus*, high priest of the Pontifical College.[3] In this way Augustus felt he could better spearhead a moral revival in the Roman Empire.

[3] "Pontifex, roman priest, pontiff; member of the highest college of priests (*collegium pontificum*) in Rome, whose leader (pontifex maximus) was the high priest of the Roman religion. The emperors, after Augustus and until AD 382, were the pontifex maximus" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 15th ed. [Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1979], 8:114).