

At last, the lines are all converging. God weaves together disparate threads.

Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor, orders a general census. He wants it both for taxation purposes and military conscription. Normal king stuff. His appointee Quirinius, the legate of Syria, is supposed to make it all happen. While this name raises an historical problem when compared to Matthew's Gospel, I find it ironic that two famous Romans—rich, powerful, and pagan—play important roles, albeit unwitting, in the arrival of One who will thoroughly outshine them.

Jewish expectation, based on Micah 5.2-4, insists that the Messiah (Son of David) must come from David's city: Bethlehem. But how will God bring Mary, who is already pregnant by the Holy Spirit, sixty miles south from Nazareth to deliver there? Answer: through Joseph, her betrothed husband—who traces his lineage back to King David. Joseph has been summoned to his ancestral home on account of the census, so they decide to travel together.

The stage is now set: right location, right pedigree. And what a stunning juxtaposition between big worldly notables and the humble heroes of God!

PS. Spoiler alert: the Bible never says that Mary traveled aboard a donkey. Nor does it say that she was nine months along. Verse 6: It came to pass while they were there that the days of her birthing were fulfilled. (My translation.) Careful reading reveals the absence of details: [a] when the couple first left Nazareth, [b] the time of year, [c] how they traveled, [d] where exactly she gave birth, or even [e] whether it happened in daytime or night.

Pageants, movies, carols, and creche scenes all speak loudly where God's word is silent. But in our eagerness to make the story memorable, are we possibly sacrificing truth? I suggest a little more silence on our part. Beyond our reassuring rituals lies this mystery: the eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us!

Child of Bethlehem ("house of bread"), man of Jerusalem ("city of peace"): You have loved us without limit or condition, in our pride and in our folly, in our virtue and our misery. Renew we pray, your gifts within us—so that we, too, may become bread and peace for others; through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

