

**Episode:** Christmas Series No. 7

**Narrator:** Tax Collector

**Primary Scriptures:** Luke 2:1-7

**Story Summary:** A tax collector tells of the world-wide census and its effects on Bethlehem

**Location:** Bethlehem

**Time:** Circa 4 BC

**Suggested Memory Scriptures:** Luke 2:4

The story of the location of Jesus' birth might be said to begin when the Israelites first settled in Canaan. The tribe of Judah was given much of the southern lands, including the village of Bethlehem. Hundreds of years later, when the future King David was born, the tribe of Judah continued to possess Bethlehem. Centuries later, after the exiles of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, the lines of tribal ownership seem to have dimmed in importance.

By the time of Jesus' birth, it probably wasn't unusual that Joseph, of the tribe of Judah, was located in Nazareth, far to the north of the original land of Judah. The Bible gives no reason why Joseph was located there, but Luke 2:4 says Joseph had to go from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea because he had to register there for the new census. It says he had to go to Bethlehem because he was of the house and line of David.

The details for the census are lost, but it is highly likely it was taken for at least two reasons: taxation and counting men eligible for the military. Historians argue about when and if the Jews were exempt for service in the Roman military, but it is highly likely the Romans would have at least wanted to know how many might be available to fight for—or against—Rome.

Rome was in a constant battle with its conquered countries and provinces about taxes, and Roman officials were often selected based on their ability to maximize tax revenue while maintaining peace. The only way Rome could know if taxes were being maximized was to know what assets and revenues were available to be taxed. Hence: a census.

Also lost to history are the records about who had to go where to register for the census. One assumption is that all Jewish males had to go to the hometown of their ancestors at the time of David, which would've been about a thousand years prior at that time. Since any written family records of that era would have been destroyed, everyone would have determined their hometown based on their family's oral histories. There could have been other rules, of course, but under most scenarios, it can be reasonably assumed that relative to the size of tiny Bethlehem, a large number of people would have descended on the village to register for the census. It is likely that housing would have been in short supply.

Historians disagree on the exact accommodations that Joseph and Mary secured. Some believe it was a cave where animals were fed, while others believe it was in a room of a private house used to keep and feed animals.