

Caesar's Decree By Dr. J. Smith

“... a decree went out from Caesar Augustus ... And Joseph also went up ... to be registered with Mary”
(Luke 2:1, 4, 5)

The Bible mentions Caesar Augustus only here, but he is a well-known figure from Roman history. He came to power about thirty years before Christ was born and ruled the world for more than forty years. His imperial reign was the golden age of the Roman Empire.

By contrast, Joseph shows just how weak the house of David had become. Notice that he did not go to Jerusalem, though it too is called the city of David. Jerusalem was the city of David's glory, where he reigned with his mighty men around him, but Joseph went to Bethlehem, the city of David's birth, the city where David grew up as a nobody, a shepherd boy. The city of his humility, that's where Joseph went.

Should we take it ill of Joseph that he didn't act a bit more like a king and live up to the heroism of his forefather David? No, we shouldn't, because God had not made Joseph a king. He had not called Joseph to royal office. And Scripture teaches that one should not take an office upon oneself without being lawfully called thereto. The Bible does not promote revolution but teaches us to trust that the powers that be have been put in place by God, not just the good ones but also the harsh and the arrogant, even Caesar Augustus.

Luke does not write subversive literature or Davidic propaganda. No, Luke writes as a Christian who acknowledges the powers that were put in place by God. And then he shows how God used the decree of Caesar to bring Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled that the Messiah would be born there.

Have you ever wondered: if God wanted Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem, why use Caesar's decree to get them there? Why not simply send an angel to command them to go? After all, God had sent an

angel to tell Mary that she would give birth to the Messiah. God had sent an angel to tell Joseph to take Mary as his wife. Angels told the shepherds that the Saviour had been born. An angel told Joseph to take Mary and the baby and flee to Egypt because Herod wanted to kill the child. And an angel told Joseph to go back to Israel when the coast was clear. There are angels everywhere in the Christmas stories. Why not here? It goes to show that God has at his disposal not only heavenly angels, those faithful servants who do his bidding, but also earthly rulers, even godless rulers who do not recognize him; God also uses those who resist and deny him. And here God had a very special purpose for Caesar. God would use Caesar to rebuild David's throne!

The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem was not easy. It was a long journey, up mountain ridges and down ravines, gradually higher and higher—not a pleasant trek for a pregnant lady. Children's Bibles often picture Mary sitting on a donkey, but our passage does not tell us that, and even if she was, it would not have been a comfortable ride.

Why did Mary have to come along to Bethlehem? You can be sure that in her condition she did not just come along for the ride, nor did Joseph decide to take her along so that he could be with her for the birth of the child. Luke tells us that she was registered too. Why? Was Mary also of the house of David? Is that why she had to come along? Some have suggested this, but our passage says nothing of Mary's family. The focus is on Joseph: *Joseph* went up to the city of David because *he* was of the house and lineage of David. Of Mary it says only that she was betrothed to him and that she was expecting a child. That fits with what we read elsewhere in Scripture. In Matthew 1, the angel says, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” In both genealogies of Christ, that of Matthew 1 and that of Luke 3, though there are many differences between them, they have this in common that both mention Joseph, not Mary, as David's descendant. The line from David to Christ runs through Joseph. Of Mary's family we know very little. Luke tells us only

that she was a kinswoman of Elizabeth, and that Elizabeth was of the daughters of Aaron. So should we believe that Mary was of the house of David but had ancestors who intermarried with the family of Aaron? Scripture doesn't say that. The only thing that Scripture does say is that she was a kinswoman of Elizabeth. So it's also possible that Mary was of the tribe of Levi and not at all related to the house of David.

To be sure, such a scenario raises questions in our minds, questions which concern passages such as Romans 1:3 (see also John 7:42, 2 Timothy 2:8). There we read that God's Son was from the seed of David according to the flesh. Does this not mean that Jesus was a direct, physical descendant of David? There are two significant phrases here. The first is "according to the flesh." This is a typical phrase of the apostle Paul. Here it does not mean that Christ is *genetically* of the seed of David, but simply that he is of the seed of David as to his fleshly nature, physically speaking, according to his humanity. What about the second phrase, that he was of the seed of David? Does that not imply physical descent? Yes, it does, but that doesn't quite answer the question: was Jesus "from the seed of David" because *Mary* was, or because *Joseph* was?

It seems to me that we sometimes overlook the significant role of Joseph in the accounts of Jesus' birth. I would ask the following questions. If our Saviour's Davidic pedigree depends on Mary, then why do the gospel writers not tell us unmistakably that Mary was of the house of David, or of the daughters of David, to borrow Luke's own language that Elizabeth was of the daughters of Aaron? Why not leave out the detail that she was a kinswoman of Elizabeth, if that would raise doubts about Jesus' ancestry? And why does the angel address *Joseph* as son of David but say nothing about Mary's lineage, and why do the gospels twice give a genealogy that runs through David to Joseph, not to Mary? Yes, why does Luke 2 say that Joseph went to the city of David because he was of the house and lineage of David, while Mary is simply called his betrothed. I daresay it's because his lineage is the one that matters, and Mary's connection to the house of David is precisely *as Joseph's betrothed*. The gospel writers are at pains to emphasize Joseph's connection to David.

Now Mary is important too, very important, but not because of her ancestry. Rather she is important because she had been chosen by God to bring his Son into the world. The angel addresses *Joseph* as "son of David," but *Mary* as "favoured one." Here's the thing: Mary had become pregnant not through Joseph but through the power of the Holy Spirit. So how could Christ possibly become the Son of David promised in the Scriptures? Only if Joseph took Mary to be his wife, for then she would leave her family for his and be united with him. That is why the angel told Joseph to take Mary as his wife. Matthew tells us that Joseph did as the angel commanded him and took Mary as his wife but did not have intimate relations with her till she brought forth her firstborn Son.

Notice though that Luke 2:5 says that Mary was *pledged* to be married to him, she was his betrothed. Consider the uniqueness of her situation. On the one hand, Joseph had taken her to be his wife. She belonged with him and could travel with him to Bethlehem. On the other hand, their marriage was not yet consummated. She was still a virgin, so for all intents and purposes she was still betrothed, because they had not become one flesh. You might say that they were married in principle but not in practice. And if Jesus is born in that situation, can he really be said to be the Son of David? There is a small element of doubt, a loophole, as it were. The Christians reading the gospels might wonder whether Jesus could really be counted as David's son, if the marriage between Joseph and Mary was not complete.

It is that "loophole" that our text closes up. For what does it say? "Joseph went up to Bethlehem to be registered *with* Mary." That little word *with* is just as subtle, and just as important, here, as it is in Genesis 3:6. They were registered together. Their names were placed together on the official tax lists of the government of Rome. If there were any lingering doubts about the status of their relationship, one need only consult the government registers where they were listed together as husband and wife. According to the enrolment of Caesar Augustus, Joseph and Mary were counted as a family unit, by imperial decree, just before Jesus was born! And after he was born, in verse 33, Luke calls Joseph and Mary "his father and his mother"; verse 41 speaks of

his parents, as does verse 48. And though Christ reminded Mary in verse 49 that he had a heavenly Father, still he went home with them to Nazareth and was submissive to them, obedient to the 5th commandment. Joseph is nothing less than Christ's human father, and *that* makes Jesus the seed of David. Caesar's decree made that an indisputable fact.

Here you see the marvelous wisdom of God. God used the decree of Caesar Augustus to make sure that His Son would be counted in the family of David. His Son became the Son of David by the highest human authority that existed. If Caesar only knew what he had done! By his decree he had made the Son of God heir to the throne of David. The very Caesar who had made Israel of no account, a small divided region in a little corner of his world empire, and who had no regard for David's throne that lay in ruins, that Caesar had begun to rebuild the throne of David. When the Roman officials wrote the names of Joseph and Mary into Caesar's registers, they wrote of Rome's fall. Here is the great irony of our passage. Caesar Augustus, the ruler under God, called a census to show off his power to the world, but through that very census he caused the most helpless person in his realm, a baby in his mother's womb, to become heir to an everlasting throne—King of kings and Lord of lords. If he only knew what he had done!

If he only knew *what God had made him do*, yes, that is the point. God shows that he is in control. Caesar may follow his own ambitions, but little does he know that his decree promotes God's decree. Earthly rulers may think that they direct the course of history, but he who sits in the heavens laughs, the LORD has them in derision, says Psalm 2, and in our text you see God's humour at work. A throne in ruins is rebuilt by Caesar's decree, and in line to the throne he places a helpless child who is none other than the Son of God. Praise God for his surpassing wisdom: he has outwitted the rulers of the earth. Praise him for his goodness, because he did it for us!



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