SCRIPTURE:
In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while (or before) Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. –Luke 2:1–7 (NIV)

MEDITATION:
A young woman, heavy with child, riding on a donkey. A bearded man, obviously older than the woman, leading the animal by a rope. Most of us have received Christmas cards adorned with a similar image. God arranged circumstances such that the Messiah would be born at Bethlehem, just as the prophet had predicted (Micah 5:2). The Gospel writers did not specify a mode of transportation because they did not need to. Travel by donkey was as commonplace in the first century as is driving an automobile today. A donkey was the equivalent of a Ford F150 in ancient Israel. It was not so swift as a horse, nor as regal as a camel (which was regarded as unclean, according to Lev. 11:4). But a donkey was sure-footed; it could plod along at three to four miles per hour while shouldering burdens of several hundred pounds. Surely a carpenter like Joseph would have owned a donkey to transport timber and to deliver finished articles to customers.

Depending on the route, the distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem is anywhere from 95 to 110 miles. That suggests an itinerary of at least four days—possibly more, if the animal is allowed a day of rest, or if the journey encompasses a Sabbath. Romanticized illustrations on Christmas cards often depict a solitary couple traveling at night—but many persons went to Bethlehem in response to
Caesar’s decree; they likely traveled in caravans, and during daylight hours, for safety.

A humble donkey brought the Savior of the world to his birthplace. We may presume that the same donkey transported the child to Egypt to escape Herod’s wrath (Matt. 2:13–15), and to Nazareth when it was safe to return (Matt. 2:20–23).

Three decades later, another donkey carried Jesus into Jerusalem on the day when he presented himself to Israel as their Messiah. (It is an interesting coincidence that the typical life-span of a donkey is thirty years.) In their accounts of Palm Sunday, all four gospel writers report the mode of transportation (Matt. 21:7; Mark 11:2; Luke 19:30–35; John 12:14). Mark and Luke emphasize that it was a young colt that no one had previously ridden. By riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus not only fulfilled an explicit prophecy (Zech. 9:9), but he also identified himself with several biblical narratives. A donkey carried the firewood when Abraham went to Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:3). Moses placed his wife and children on a donkey when he returned to Egypt to free the Israelites (Exod. 4:20). Saul was searching for his father’s donkeys when he first encountered the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 9–10). As instructed by David, Solomon rode his father’s mule to his coronation (1 Kings 1:33).

An ancient rabbinic tradition held that the Messiah would come in a cloud of glory if Israel was worthy of him, but he would arrive seated on a donkey if the people were unworthy. Those who shouted Hosannas on Palm Sunday were unworthy as their subsequent actions would reveal. Scripture promises that Israel will be worthy when the Messiah comes again. As Jesus ascended to heaven in a cloud, his disciples were "looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'" (Acts 1:10–11).

**REFLECTION:**
Jewish tradition associated the donkey with royalty, but this animal also symbolized servitude, obedience, sacrifice, and redemption. The Son of God entered this world in a humble setting and used lowly means of transportation. He was entitled to adulation and worship, but he lived a life of humility and service.

Zechariah’s prophecy and Matthew’s account of the triumphal entry mention two donkeys—a mature animal and her foal. Rabbi Jason Sobel sees the young animal as representing the New Covenant which Jesus introduced while simultaneously fulfilling the Mosaic covenant. A beast of burden symbolizes mundane activities of the workaday, material world of which we are a part. Jesus utilizes material things, but he rides above them.

**PRAYER:**
Father, thank you for the ability to learn about the material world through science. May we always recognize that our everyday tasks constitute service to you. Please help us to follow your son’s example by serving others with humility. Amen.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Joseph Lechner earned a BS in chemistry from Roberts Wesleyan College and a PhD in biochemistry from The University of Iowa. He is retired after 39 years of teaching at Mount Vernon (Ohio) Nazarene University. He has three grown children and two granddaughters.