When Caesar Augustus decided to conduct a census of the Roman Empire, he did not send interviewers door to door to count each village’s residents, as is the practice in the USA’s census taking. Instead, he required each man to return “to his own city.”

In Luke’s gospel, Chapter 2, this accounts for why Joseph leaves his northern home in Galilee and undertakes a weeklong journey with his wife-to-be to the town of Bethlehem, which is in southern Judea.

But, why is Joseph in Galilee in the first place? If his ties to Judea are so strong that he must return there for the census, what could have motivated him to ever leave it? Although we cannot give a definite answer, there is a sequence of historical events that may indicate why Joseph, a descendant of David’s royal house, a house identified with Bethlehem of Judea, lived in Galilee. In short, the answer is that a century or less earlier, Joseph’s ancestors took part in a mass migration of Judeans to settle in Galilee.

The story actually begins in 732-722 B.C., when the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern Israelite kingdom of Israel, which included the regions of Galilee and Samaria. The book of Second Kings relates, in Chapter 17, how the inhabitants were carried off to Assyria in exile. A few years later, residents of other regions of the empire were settled there.

Galilee’s situation after the conquest has long been unclear. Was it treated like Samaria, which 2 Kings specifically mentions, or was it treated differently?

Archaeologist Zvi Gal discovered that Galilee was emptied of population by the Assyrian conquest and essentially remained desolate until the beginning of the first century B.C. His on-the-ground examinations of the occupation history of 80 different Galilean sites showed a six-century break in habitation. Other archaeological investigations confirm this conclusion.

So, where did the Galileans of Jesus’ day come from?

The ancient historian Josephus indicates that, in 104-103 B.C., the Maccabean king of Judea, Aristobolus, took control of Galilee on his way farther north to conquer the Itureans who lived west of Mount Hermon. His successor, Alexander Janneaus, sent thousands of Judeans north to settle Galilee and farm its rich agricultural land during his 25-year reign. Not only did this give Judeans access to an increased amount of agricultural products, but it also solved an apparent crisis of overpopulation in Judea.

Archaeological evidence also makes it clear that these new inhabitants were from Judea, for the excavated finds from the first centuries B.C. and A.D. follow the same characteristics as those of Judea. In particular, Galilean finds reveal the same concern for ritual purity with regard to the Jerusalem temple typical of Judea. The finds characteristic of Judea and Galilee that differ from the surrounding regions include: immersion pools for purification baths; stone drinking vessels which protect from impurity; the practice of ossuary burial; and an absence of pig bones in the waste heaps.

If Joseph’s family came to Galilee by this scenario, then it is quite possible that it was his grandfather who migrated from Judea to Galilee in the early decades of the first century B.C. Or, it could have been his great-grandfather. In addition, the same scenario may apply to Mary, but her engagement to Joseph caused the gospels to record only his family lineage, and leave hers out.

The implications of this repopulation of Galilee during the first century B.C. are quite significant, for it indicates that the people called Galileans had lived in that area for less than a century at the time of Jesus’ birth; they did not represent a centuries-old population of that area. Their identity was still primarily Judean and had not yet been transformed into a Galilean distinctiveness.