



Nativity as told by Matthew

By

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Cast

Interviewer/ compere
John Mark
Venerable John
Dr Luke
Taxman Matthew

Parents and children in line up for the genealogy, some are speaking parts

Abraham
Isaac
Jacob
Judah
Perez

Ram
Boaz
Jesse
David
Solomon
Rehoboam
Jehosophat
Hezekiah
Manasseh
Jechonial
Zerubbabel

plus 23 non speakers, representing all others in the genealogy, holding placards, with their names

Joseph – *a clear speaker*
Counsellor
Person (angel)

Wise One – a major speaking part
Wise Child Two - a minor speaking part
Wise Child Three - a minor speaking part
Wise Four – a middling speaking part

Camel One
Donkey One
Donkey Two

Market Stall holder
Woman Shopper
Voices

Herod
Courtier
three minions
soldiers
Rachel weeping
comforting women

Mary

*There are 45 speaking parts, and about 25 non-speaking parts.
In Matthew's account, Mary does not speak, so Mary could be a small child.*

This is intended to be a nativity play that puts adults as well as children on the stage – making it a genuine congregational event,

Its content is also intended to speak to adults as well as children. Adults can enjoy it for themselves as well as for their children, and they can enjoy it because it may provoke them to adult thinking and believing. The adults can talk about it with the children, so that they can

see what is going on and can learn – and no doubt they will have their own ideas and share them with a little encouragement.

I have left Jeremy Kyle in the script, though he is now well forgotten. No doubt, members of any future cast will be able to update this and other references, so that they are intelligible.

PLAY

SCENE One

A panel, as at a Literary Festival

The participants will be seated as at a table, facing the congregation. The interviewer will move around like Jeremy Kyle.

We need projected on the wall behind something that looks like a banner, in block capitals saying

GOSPEL WRITERS DISCUSS BEGINNINGS-

Interviewer: Welcome to the Gospel Writers' Congress. Our special guest today is Mark who has just published his punchy Gospel. And with him, we have three others who are known to be writing Gospels, the Venerable John, Taxman Matthew and Dr Luke. They are a bit peeved that Mark has got there first, but I know they all think their work will be better because they are thinking about it for longer.

So let's get on. It seems to me a problem for any writer is how you begin. Some people chew their pens for day after day because they can't find a good opening sentence. Can I ask you, Mark, how you solved this problem/

Mark: I'm not a person to mess about. I just start at the beginning and get on with it. So I wrote: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Interviewer: What was the beginning?

Mark: Jesus, thirty years old, came to John at the river Jordan and was baptized; the Spirit of God came upon him, and he went into the desert; when he came back, he started preaching and healing all round Galilee. All that by the end of chapter one, story after story, no time to get bored.

Interviewer: I see the Venerable John wants to say something about this.

Venerable John: Mark says he starts at the beginning and then he tells us what was happening around AD 30. That's right in the middle of the story. The beginning lies much further back, at the real undateable beginning, before all things, when God was with the Word. The story of Jesus the Son of God begins there. Mark misses that out altogether – I think he is a young man in an unwise hurry.

Dr Luke: You mustn't hold his youth against him, John. Anyway, your way of talking about the beginning is so mysterious and speculative. It is all hidden in God beyond our imagination. Wonderful, but I want to tell stories my ordinary readers can follow. And so I will do what both you and Mark don't do: tell some stories about how this Jesus was born. There are some good stories around, and they tell us why it is really no surprise that this baby grew up to be the Saviour and Light of the world.

Interviewer: Taxman Matthew, I have been told you are going to have two chapters about the birth of Jesus. So you go along with Dr Luke, don't you?

Taxman Matthew: Yes, I do. But I shall tell it in my own way, from the stories I have collected. And the first thing I will do is to lay out for readers the genealogy of Jesus, the whole line of his ancestors from Abraham down to Joseph who was generally assumed to be his father when he grew up in Nazareth.

Mark: laughing scornfully: I'm fed up with taking stick from you old people. You pan my work, but at least I've got it out to the public, while yours are only ideas in your heads. And my story has life and action and it will sell. Starting a Gospel with a genealogy is a fatal turnoff.

Taxman Matthew: You don't know what you are talking about. Let me show you what a genealogy is...I've got my friends here to demonstrate....*(he waves to the audience and some people start coming forward)*

Interviewer: I don't want any trouble or chaos....you can't demonstrate here....this is not your show

Taxman Matthew: Don't worry – this will put your show on top of the charts
turning to the congregation Now people this is my genealogy of Jesus, which shows how he fits into the story of God with his people the Jews. I trace the line of the fathers and grandfathers of Jesus, starting with

Abraham ...

SCENE two

adults and children who have been primed come up in roughly the right order. They all have cards with their names on and say them out loudly and stand in order, father to son, across the front of the church. Some have a bit more to say, explaining their significance in the sequence...They can dress themselves in fitting ways if they wish – the wanderers in ancient or modern walking gear, the kings with crowns and swords etc They stand in three rows across the church, of fourteen each. The cards are in different colours for each row – first Wanderers, then Kings, then Waiters

Abraham: God promised me, that I, Abraham, would have many descendants and the world would be blessed through them – but it would not happen in my lifetime, so I had to wander and wait and be content with just one son –

Isaac: I am Abraham's only son, and he tried to kill me... but God rescued me and I then had sons, Esau, the hairy man, and Jacob, the smooth man...

Jacob: I tricked my brother and took his place in the line of promise but I had to go wandering in the desert and wrestling with angels all night to hold on to it

Judah – I had a lot of troublesome brothers: remember Joseph and his irritating coat of many colours?

Perez – I'm here too, though you never hear anything about me – I was the first generation to live in Egypt on the road to slavery

Hezron

Ram - we are still wandering, but now we've got out of Egypt on our way to the promised land

Amminadab

Nahshon

Salmon,

Boaz – my mother was Rahab the prostitute and I married Ruth, a foreigner – you remember the romantic story about her in the Bible?

Obed

Jesse – I had some big boys, but God chose my little shepherd boy David to be king

David - I was the great king of Israel in Jerusalem and we were blessed by God, so that we could settle down

Solomon, King, all very splendid, I built the Temple for God but then was not faithful to him

Rehoboam – the kingdom is splitting up

Abijah

Asa

Jehoshaphat – we had some battles

Joram

Uzziah: When I died, Isaiah saw God in the temple and was called to be a prophet in hard times

Jotham

Ahaz

Hezekiah – I was a good king but I got into deep trouble with Sennacherib

Manasseh - I made ghastly mistakes, went through terrible punishment, deep repentance, gracious restoration

Amos

Josiah

Jechoniah - I was taken away into Babylon, when Jerusalem was destroyed, so the people have to start wandering all over again

Shealtiel

Zerubbabel, I was born in exile in Babylon, and helped to restore Judah when the people were allowed back

*Abiud,
Eliakim,
Azor,
Zadok -
Achim
Eliud
Eleazar
Matthan
Jacob*

Joseph - here I am, standing in this great story of the promise of God –

Abraham wandered and David seemed to find the kingdom, which this long line was looking for, then his children messed it up and lost it, and we are still looking for it. We have had three fourteens of fathers and sons, coming down this far. That is six sevens. So now we start of the seventh seven – is that a good sign? Seven is a special number, isn't it. I wonder what will happen next? Can anything great happen to me? I'm just a small-town carpenter, not a king. We have come right down in the world. But I'm a good craftsman and a respectable man, yes, very respectable. I am going to be married soon, to Mary – she's a good young woman, I shall look after her. Our children may not turn out to be kings – I wouldn't want that, as it would mean they would have to fight the Romans, and only fools try to do that – but I hope they grow up to be good and peaceful people. We'll see, won't we? When you think of all these ancestors, all these people who are my fathers and grandfathers, all this blood, all these genes, it could get you worried about what might come next. It could be better or worse than I can imagine – we'll just have to trust God and do our best and press on....

But I mustn't maunder on. God is greater than all the ups and downs of this family and all its great and little people, its good and bad people, its successful and its disappointed people. We are still wandering, but not because we are lost and abandoned. We wander because God has made us a great promise: you will be my people and through you, all nations will be blessed. I hear that promise, though it is hard to see how it will ever be fulfilled. I can hear it now, is it the angels singing it? Can you hear...

INTERLUDE

*A choral group sitting in the balcony at the back has quietly started singing
Come thou long expected Jesus born to set thy people free....
It can be displayed on the wall and everyone will join in without being told*

The lines of ancestors return to their places.

SCENE Three

Joseph on the stage: in trouble - with a soberly dressed counsellor

Joseph This is devastating, I can't believe it. I thought Mary was a good woman. I know she's very young but she seemed sensible. And being young is no excuse for this sort of thing.

Counsellor: What sort of thing? try to explain it calmly

Joseph: Mary, I am engaged to her. But we haven't consummated the marriage. Then I noticed she was getting to look as though she was pregnant. I asked her mother. I said, You've got to play fair with me. I'm prepared to take on Mary as my wife, but not with someone else's child. And her mother told me, after some shilly-shallying, that it seems to be true: she is going to have a baby.

But it can't be mine, so you know what that means. All the town will know, and I will be disgraced. My customers don't trick me, I don't let them, but now they will all say, He has his eyes open when he does business, but he has been tricked by his wife.

What shall I do? I could have her stoned for this, couldn't I?

Counsellor: You could, but would you want to? What would the town think of Joseph in future? The gentle kind man who was turned cruel and vindictive by what a poor girl did to him and to herself? You would be left wondering what kind of man you are, wouldn't you?

Joseph: Maybe, but it's not much help to speculate about my reputation in the long-term. What am I to do now? The baby will be born in a month or two.

Counsellor: Well, one possibility is to say privately to her that the marriage is off – you divorce her and not let anything get into the papers. She and her family will have to cope with the birth as best they can, but they will leave you out of and be grateful that you have left them with minimum hurt to them.

Joseph: Yes that is a good plan. But I know I shall go grieving for a long time – I really loved Mary and looked forward to living with her for the rest of my life. Now I won't have children. I can see I must divorce her, but – do you know that divorce is like war – it doesn't solve problems, it just changes them?

Counsellor: Perhaps, but let's not get into philosophical discussions. You need to get to a good solicitor and do this job quickly – and very quietly.

A person in white clothes, but no wings, - and it could be a child – comes alongside Joseph at this point, seemingly from nowhere

Person: Just a minute Joseph. Don't be so hasty.

Joseph: Who are you? I don't know you.

Person: No, but I know you and I have something to say to you about your problem. I hope you will listen to some good advice.

Joseph: I've already had good advice – I don't want any more. I just need to get to work on it.

Person: Not very good advice, because it's been based on inadequate information.

Joseph: What do you mean, inadequate information. I know the facts.

Person: If you know the facts, Why are you afraid to take Mary to be your wife?

Joseph: Wouldn't you be afraid to take her, if you knew she had broken her promise to be your faithful wife and gone with another man?

Person: Probably I would. But those are not the facts – certainly not the facts you should be basing your plan on.

Joseph: Look, if you know something I don't know, hurry up and tell me. I am sick of your playing with me – as though it wasn't enough to have Mary doing it.

Person: Joseph, you should not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. You certainly should not be looking for cruel-kind ways of dealing with the situation, like divorcing her quietly. What is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. It comes from God. There is nothing unholy or unworthy about it. And she will bear a son, and you, you Joseph, shall call his name Jesus and you know what that name means. He will save his people from their sin. He will not in any way be the living memorial of the sin your suspicion imagines.

Counsellor: Be careful, Joseph. I do not know that this is wise advice. You are in danger of becoming sentimental, and idealistic, and optimistic and theological and altogether impractical.

Joseph to the counsellor: Maybe it is all that. And I am not ungrateful for the help you tried to give me. But what this person says lifts my spirits, it makes taking on Mary and her child sound like a dangerous adventure, that might turn out disastrously, or gloriously. It is just possible this child could save his people from their sins.

I would be saved from *my* sins, if I take him on. I won't be giving in to my respectability, my caution, my narrow moralism. And when I think about my ancestors, they took risky paths and God was somehow with them – and they have plenty of sins that need even now to be taken away.

Counsellor: Well, you evidently don't want my advice so I'll leave you – you'll get my bill tomorrow.

Joseph: Thank you – you'll get your money the day after – and the day after that, Jesus may be here to save you from your sins.

Person: just one more thing: do you remember Isaiah said, A virgin will conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel? What is happening now, looks something like that, doesn't it? I'm so glad you've decided to take this on

That's all for now.

So I'll say, Good bye: God is with us.

Joseph: Good bye, God be with you.

INTERLUDE

We sing Hail to the Lord's Anointed, great David's greater Son

SCENE Four

Compere: So Joseph, as Matthew says, was supposed to be the father of Jesus, and he took on the task of being the earthly father of Jesus and is a model to all fathers, natural and otherwise. All children are precious gifts of God however they come.

Joseph and Mary got together to prepare for the baby. When the baby was born, they named him Jesus, Saviour.

Matthew gave us the genealogy to place Jesus in the line of the promise of God to Abraham and his descendants. He placed Jesus in the memory of David the King – and the kingdom with all its splendour and all its failure. He placed Jesus at the end of the fourteen generations after the return from exile in Babylon, a time when Jews were under foreign rule, and could never get themselves together very happily, and prophecy died away. At the end of this dismal troubled period, God comes in a baby to start up hope again, for the people of Israel.

And for the world. The world too was hungry and waiting, searching and travelling.

Here a pp is needed: It needs to take long enough to impress people. It is first dark, and then with small stars, but still the overall impression is dark. Then suddenly The Star blazes out

Darkness – can we engineer a sudden sense of darkness? eg by projecting a blue-black screen on the wall, and then slowly let it be replaced with a slide punctured with a few, and then many little distant stars scattered. Let that be in a moment or two of silence and blaze a brighter star and let it move a little

While this is going on wise men and women come into the central aisle at the back of church, we can have more than three. And they can be children – this drama is for children. Some can be dressed as camels and donkeys (carrying the gifts and the paraphernalia of the journey).

Wise One: It's still shining

Wise Child Two: It's still going

Wise Child Three: We are still following

Camel One: Or being pushed

Donkey One I'm so tired I can't bother to be bolshie any longer

Donkey Two: Yes it damages your character working for wise men and women

Wise Four: No grumbling in the ranks there. We are doing well: this is Jerusalem we are coming to, this is our goal.

They advance to the stage, the star still shining, so that they go towards it; the star is over the whole stage, not precisely over Herod, where Herod, looking suitably Herodish, with all his pale and vicious imitators round him, including his unsavoury womenfolk, are gathered on one side, with Herod seated on a chair as high as a tennis-umpire's or a step-ladder (better belt Herod in to please the health and safety officer). On the other side of the stage the ordinary people of Jerusalem mill about their daily business.

Wise One comes to the people: Where is the one who is born the king of the Jews?

Market stall holder: Do you mean Herod?

Wise One: Has he just been born king of the Jews?

Market stall holder No he's been king a long time and he's not very just, either

Woman shopper: He wasn't born to be king – he got power by wangling and war, working with the Romans.

Different Voices say things like: He's not king of the Jews. I don't rate him....he's a traitor.... mind what you say, his agents are everywhere....

Wise One: We have seen in the East the star of a new king of the Jews, a new-born king. And we have come to give him honour. We have come a long way. He must be here somewhere.

The Wise Ones look about and veer and peer towards the other side of the stage where Herod's court is. As they move a step or two in that direction, the market people quietly depart. The Wise Ones have not yet got to Herod's court, there is still a recognisable distance between them. They go on looking about and looking up at the star questioningly

Someone in Herod's court whispers to him. Herod lets out a cry of anger and fear:

Call a council, a full council meeting! Emergency! Hurry! National security!

They say a king of the Jews has just been born. They obviously can't mean me. So someone is after my job, making trouble for me – and that will mean trouble for all of you.

So you'd better come up with some useful intelligence.

If God's anointed king, the Christ, were to be born, where would it be? I'm not saying Christ has been born, but we've got to take this rumour seriously.

The scribes ruffle their scrolls ostentatiously and huddle together as though they are doing some hard thinking. Then one says

It could be in Bethlehem in Judaea. It is written in the prophecy of Micah:

And you O Bethlehem in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.

Herod: Good, We'll work on that lead. Now clear the court and bring these travellers to me, secretly. No fuss.

The wise men and women come into Herod, escorted, without their camels and donkeys.

Herod, fawning, as charming as a crook: Welcome to Jerusalem, wise ones. I am honoured to have you here. And I am proud to hear that the birth of a new king of the Jews has been publicised by a star outshining all the others. That delights my heart – the welfare of my country and its people means more to me than I can say. So please help me find this king so that I can honour him as he deserves. When did you see his star first?

Wise Four: Thank you for your welcome, Herod. We saw the star about 18 months ago. It took us some time to work out what it meant. Reading the stars is very specialist work, you know, and we are not cheap astrologists who write in the newspapers for money.

Herod: No of course not – I can see you are quite the top sort of star-reader. So you say 18 months – the child may be a toddler by now?

Wise One: We cannot be sure about that. It may be so. But if the star appeared when the child was conceived he may only be 9 months old now. You see, just as the mother has to have nine months to bring the baby to birth, we needed at least as long to get going on this journey.

Herod: Yes, yes, I get the point. So to find this king-baby, you've got to go and look at hundreds of babies haven't you? Can you do it?

Wise One: We have our methods, Herod. We know how to follow the star. In our line of work we don't do computer searches, we do star searches. Much more efficient.

Herod: Well, that sounds great, very promising. I could do with people like you to advise me. But look, you go now and find the baby-king and then come and tell me where he is. I will go to give him honour and bow the knee to him. While you have gone, I'll get my presents ready for him – I'm sure you won't let me down.

All the wise men: Of course not, Herod. We are glad to help you in this good work.

INTERLUDE

*The stage is vacated. `while all sing
Bethlehem of noblest cities, none can once with thee compare*

SCENE Five: mostly without words but with the music of *In the bleak midwinter in the background*

Mary and Joseph take their place, with the baby towards one side of the stage

*The background is generally dark, but the star is shining.
If it can be engineered the star moves from side of the wall away from the Family, until it stands over them and sheds its light on them.*

The Wise Ones appear with all their entourage and come up the aisle to the house, and they 'rejoice exceedingly with great joy'. Does that need to be scripted or can they make it up appropriately – in word or song? Some spontaneity would be a happy thing.

*Can we keep the background dark with star, here, but get a spotlight on the Baby? They come to Mary, fall down and worship and bring out their gifts. I think we could do something a bit different for gifts: instead of boxes wrapped as contemporary Christmas presents, why not have three small children suitably dressed, who are themselves presents offered to Jesus? And while this is happening, slowly, solemnly, not in a rush, **WE CAN SING**, sitting*

In the bleak midwinter --- Yet what I can I give him, Give my heart

SCENE Six

The sky with the star is replaced with a sky with ordinary stars

The wise ones move to the other side of the stage, backs to Mary and the Baby

Wise One: Now we can go home

Wise Two: Back to Herod first, he wants to know.

Wise Four: I've got my suspicions about Herod. When did you hear that a practical king like Herod, a king who got his throne by fighting for it, and keeps his throne by fighting for it, would welcome a new king?

Wise One: The trouble with you, Four, is that you're too nervy and too political. I thought Herod was charming.

Wise Three: But was it true? I don't think so. I am not going back to Herod, whatever you may do.

Wise Two: We'll sleep on it and talk about it again in the morning.

And in the night, they sleep, lying on the stage

A Person (all in white and without wings) stands in the middle of the still bodies and speaks

Between you, you have nearly got Herod sussed. Now in your dream you will be brought to a wise decision based on sound information. Herod does not know how to honour a child or anybody else. He just uses them, and if he can't use them, he ignores them, and if he can't ignore them, he fears them and when he is afraid, he kills. He wants to know where the baby is so that he can kill him, so do not tell him. Do not go near him. Get back to your country by the back roads, and take the joy and the light of this baby with you.

You can wake up and get on your journey as quickly as you like now.

The Person fades off to a back corner of the stage. The Wise Ones come quickly out of sleep, all talking at once – things like

That's quite clear, I was mistaken to trust Herod.... We have no time to lose, we must be on our way....Get the camels quickly... I want that baby to grow up to be king ...

They move off the stage.

SCENE Seven

Mary and Joseph with the baby can have stayed on the stage in scene six. When the Wise Ones sleep, they too can sleep. When the wise ones wake and leave, the Person in White can move from his corner and come over to Mary and Joseph who are still sleeping.

The Person comes again, and says: Joseph, this is urgent. Wake up, Take the child and his mother and run to Egypt – you must seek asylum there, because Herod is after the child and wants to kill him. He is sending out search parties now. Go quickly

Joseph wakes up Mary; they pick up their things, and carrying the baby, run down the centre aisle and out of the church.

SCENE Eight

Herod rampages on to the stage with all his miserable minions and murderous soldiers.

Where are those Wise Men? Those tricksters, charlatans! How many days since they went to find this upstart king?

A Minion Ten days, your majesty

Herod And are they anywhere in the country?

a Minion Intelligence Officer There have been no sightings

Herod So they have decided to trick me, after all the help I gave them.

A Minion even more intelligent: Perhaps they could not find the baby and were ashamed to come and admit to you they were incompetent charlatans

Herod: cunningly: That could be, but suppose it is the other way – they found the baby, they want to build up the baby to be a rival to me, to topple my kingdom? Suppose there is a baby king out there somewhere – *with sudden panic:* I am not safe, I shall never be safe. Every baby I look at I will think: there is the one who is coming to get me. In ten years time, I will look at all ten year olds, like Goliath looked at the boy David and got a stone in his forehead. In twenty years time, I will be old and frail, and I won't dare to have a young man anywhere near me. If that baby is there, if that baby is allowed to go on being out there, I can never be safe, I can never sleep.

So this is what we shall do. Go, all round Bethlehem, kill all the boys two years and under, and make sure it is *all*. Don't let any mother persuade you to make any exceptions. If you are soft and don't do the job properly you will find me very hard

All the soldiers shout: Yes Herod, Herod live for ever, the great king, our Fuehrer.
They rush out, drawing their swords, shouting all the time, running in all directions out of the church by various doors. When they are in other parts of the building we hear hitting and screaming. Then a group of woman (or girls old enough to take the strain of acting this seriously) come in and onto the stage Maybe some suitable support via the amplifiers could be added? We need smiting and screaming and wailing, but it has to be carefully done – expressive but not for mere horror

One woman is weeping, My children, my children, all murdered, Why? Why? [Bloody Herod! Bloody men!] My lovely children, gone.

The others say words of calming or comfort - but she goes on
Don't say it! There's nothing you can say. Words won't bring my precious children back. If you won't scream and grieve with me, go away, you're no help at all....

There is no ending – this goes on (we cannot bear to let it go on too long) until it is overwhelmed and fades away in a song - If we had a composer, all this action could be accompanied by music, which could finally fade into the sadness of death and transmute into the music for the carol –

[When this play was first performed, the lamenting of Rachel was out of view, in a room next door with the door open. Three women lamented heart-rendingly, deeply impressing the congregation.]

SING Unto us a boy is born, king of all creation

Suggested possibilities for Final talk and prayers

That's the story of Christmas as Matthew tells it – or very close to it.

Just a couple of points to emphasise, to take away and think about.

Remember Jesus was a Jew and has meaning within the history of God with the Jews, from Abraham through David up to Jesus. This was not an easy history: there was promise and disappointment, success and failure, following God and diverging from God. And it left people in the time of Jesus wanting a saviour but not clear where or how it would come.

The saviour comes in a baby – It needs insight and openness to see and receive the baby. Joseph needed help to get past his standard conception of fatherhood to be able to take on Mary with Jesus.

The wise men and women were looking for a king, so they looked in Jerusalem and in Herod's court. But when they found the baby in humble circumstances, they had to modify their search for a king, and value the baby for himself.

They had to do what the parable in Matthew 25 says we all have to do if we are to see and receive the Son of Man: we value and receive all sorts of people who look quite unlike the glorious Son of Man we are seeking.

Jesus the valued baby is also the endangered baby and the protected baby.

But Jesus was protected from dying at the start of his journey, which led to his being killed by Pontius Pilate, ending a life which from beginning to end was his self-giving to others.

The play ends with the women lamenting, because that is where Matthew ends his nativity story. We have followed the text, leaving nothing out, and avoiding admixtures from Luke or elsewhere.



The genealogical ensemble



Herod 'welcomes' the wise men



Herod instructs his thugs