When Mary tells Joseph: A play based on Matthew 1:18–19

This play looks at a summary in Matthew 1:18–19. The summary discloses that Joseph learns of Mary’s pregnancy and chooses to divorce her. The play, based on this summary, investigates how he may have learned of her pregnancy, that is, from Mary herself. The play combines scholarship and the standard literary features of a drama-character, conflict, plot, setting, point of view, tone and dialogue. It includes material from Luke 1, Deuteronomy 22:21–29 and Numbers 30:6–8. The play encourages and engages the imagination of the cast and the audience.

The characters

**Announcer:** He or she is a modern person in modern dress.

**Mary:** A young woman betrothed to Joseph; she is young, pretty and graceful.

**Joseph:** A carpenter in Nazareth; he is bearded and handsome and a bit older than Mary.

**Time:** Daytime. About 4 BC

**Place:** The carpentry shop and home of Joseph in Nazareth of Galilee, a Roman Province.

**Set:** A carpenter’s shop with wooden tools and wooden implements like a yoke for oxen and a shepherd’s staff. Wooden sawhorses with lumber on them are upstage left and upstage right and are part of Joseph’s home and shop. Simple wooden tools are spread on them. Two wooden benches adorn centre stage. There is ample room to move around the wooden furniture on the stage. An imaginary door is downstream left. A black stage curtain marks the entrance in and out.

1. To date, there have been four performances of this play. However, reading a play also gives satisfaction. DiYanni (2008:900) expresses this as, ‘How do we imaginatively reconstruct a play in our minds? Essentially, we translate the script we read into a mental performance that we imagine.’ We read Matthew 1:18–19 frequently in churches, especially at Christmas. Long (2001:44) views a service of worship in which a text is read as a play, a play performed in a kind of community theatre with God as the audience. The worshippers are the actors ‘and the words and actions of worship form the script’ for the various parts of the actors (ibid:44).

2. Forde (1990:15) observes ‘It is a mistake to believe that there are two different sorts of art: Christian art and everybody else’s art. Art is not different in this respect from, say, cooking. Good bread made by a pagan is just as nourishing as good bread made by a Christian. The worth and validity of a piece of art stand separate from the beliefs of its creator. And that is true even when those beliefs are embodied in it. Art is not a matter of content but of form.’

3. Edyvean (1970:18–19) distinguishes religious drama and its elements from Christian drama. Christian drama combines these elements:
   1. The idea that human beings are, in some way, responsible. The drama may investigate freedoms or limits, but it addresses the concept that people are responsible for their actions and are whole people.
   2. It explores Christian concepts like forgiveness, repentance, atonement, judgment, fellowship, confession, trials, trust and faith.
   3. Christian drama emphasises redemption and hope, no matter how dire the circumstances.
   4. Love is human love directed toward others and directed upward toward God. This is in contrast to a worldly idea of love that dotes on self-love.
   5. There is symbolism.
   6. Jesus Christ is central. We see the life of Christ in the characters in some way.

According to Edyvean’s definition, this play, based on Matthew 1:18–19, is Christian drama. One way to look at a text and the theology it contains is to view it as a sacred experience, specifically as a range of sacred experiences ‘accessible to the contemporary heart and mind’ (Wells 2004:35–36). Wells (ibid:37) advises against denying the narrative and overemphasising a ‘propositional truth’. In other words, drama can express a text.

4. Brown (2008:177–178), a strong advocate of combining imagination and Christianity, thinks that imagination and faithful exegetes help explain difficult miracles or difficult moral lessons, as in the case of Elijah on Mount Carmel and his slaughter of the false prophets (1 Kgs 18). For example, this play invites the audience to imagine a carpenter’s shop and what Mary and Joseph look like. A reader does these things quite naturally when reading a text. Some would call this play a bibliodrama. According to Pitzele (1998:13), bibliodrama allows passionate, literate teachers of the Bible to make the Bible come alive to a modern audience that combines scholarship, book knowledge and street smarts. However, Pitzele (ibid:13) sees the Bible as a living myth. I see it and its characters as real. We agree, however, that the biblical text is ‘relevant, disturbing, and still capable of taking our breath away’ (see Pitzele ibid:13). Bibliodrama begins with the ability to read the biblical text creatively (Pitzele ibid:26). Although starting with commentaries, the interaction moves on to the stage where ‘the text is given a voice and answers me back’, Pitzele (ibid:28) writes.

5. The stage is minimal. The blocking, the movements of the actors on the stage (see DiYanni 2008:929), weaves in and around Joseph’s two workstations and the wooden chairs in the centre of the stage.

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**Note:**
Dedicated to Thabiso Katiba, JC Potgieter and Esmari Linde, three fine actors who played the Narrator, Joseph, and Mary respectively in February 2013 in Potchefstroom, South Africa.

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the horizontal upstage boundary of the single room stone house.

Costumes:
Mary and Joseph wear sandals and old, loose, long clothes. Mary wears a graceful head covering. Joseph’s hands are those of a working man. (Mary is upstage left with her back to the audience. Joseph is stage right with his back to the audience. He quietly works with his tools at the sawhorses. The Announcer enters carrying a Bible. The Announcer greets the audience warmly.)

Introduction
Announcer: The Holy Scriptures contain many silences. Often a writer squeezes together events and summarises them. The scriptures in both testaments are known for their brevity, their conciseness. This play investigates one such silence in the Gospel of Matthew. The silence involves when Mary tells Joseph she is pregnant with the Son of God.

This short play relies on supplemental information about the birth of Jesus the Messiah from the Gospel of Luke. Listen to the summary from the Gospel of Matthew.

1. What do I want to cover in the play? (See Pitzel 1998:117.)
2. What opportunities do I see for providing sound commentary on the text?
3. Who are the characters in the scene and what are their normal emotions?
4. How do I build accurately upon the parts of the play, taken from a summary in scripture, to reflect other sections of the scripture?
5. Where is God in the drama? (See Pitzel ibid:222–224; Brand 2009:185–184.)
6. Author has to provide the correct page number as it differs from the reference list.

7. Anderson (2006:9–10) believes that there are two ways to approach a study of the Bible. The first is an academic study in the classroom. The second is what he calls an attempt to stand in the world and to look out at the world through the window of biblical faith (Anderson’s italics). Anderson (ibid:12–13) continues to write that the Bible presents historical drama. Like any great drama, biblical drama grows in a unity, because it moves from a beginning to an end and from one creation to a new one. Although the Bible has many different authors, many different historical situations and many kinds of theological expressions, it combines this great variety into dynamic movement, something similar to the plot of a drama, that binds the whole together.

8. While I was writing this play, I remembered the insights and definitions that Quash (2008:4–6) gives: Dramas display human actions and temporal events in specific contexts. Theodramatics concerns itself with human actions (people), temporal events (time), and the specific contexts (place) in relation to God’s purposes. Quash’s italics). According to Lostracco and Wilkerson (2008:1), the central idea of a story ‘reveals the author’s point of view on some aspect of life’. My academic work has been largely on obscure portions of Scripture and often on silent and unnamed characters. I investigate silences in the biblical text instead of reading quickly over them. This play presents one such time of reflection and pause. The setting supports the central idea — that Mary told Joseph she was pregnant — by having the meeting take place in the home or workshop of Joseph (see Lostracco & Wilkerson ibid:32).

9. The conversation between Mary and Joseph must have provoked Joseph’s anger, because he decides to divorce Mary. In deciding to write a play about this conversation, I realised that drama has advantages over succinct prose in the following ways (see Clark, Brubaker & Zuck 1986:545–546):

A. A story often becomes real and alive with enactment.
B. A drama on the stage conveys honest emotions and feelings. A reader may miss these feelings with just a casual read.
C. A drama provides a teaching venue and a learning venue quite different from a classroom.
D. A drama promotes friendships on levels different from those in a classroom.
E. Becoming actors in a play enables people to think outside themselves.
F. Taking part in a drama allows an actor, via imagination, to gain insights into the thinking and actions of another person.

10. The accounts of Matthew and Luke differ in that Matthew emphasises Joseph, ‘whose dreams and actions stitch the narrative together’, whilst Luke’s account ‘centers on Mary and paralyses the births of Jesus and John the Baptist’ (Brass 2007:220). However, both gospels focus on themes of fulfilment and promise, on Jesus as the new Adam and David, the one coming of Jesus as the fulfillment of the hopes of the Jews (Strauss ibid:220). Brown (2008:184) believes that ‘unusual stimuli’, like a drama that portrays a text, ‘can sometimes deepen engagement rather than undermine it’ for an audience. A purpose of this play is to pause and reflect on two significant verses in scripture.

11. This play refutes the charge that the birth of Jesus in the way it came about is myth or imagination on the part of Matthew, because Luke records similar details in a different account. Furthermore, the tone of both Matthew and Luke is different from the tone of pagan stories that recount when the gods had intercourse with women (see France 1989:76). Luke and Matthew have been preached many times. Childers (1998:9) comments that, whilst preachers and the theatre share much in common, ‘the vast, fertile country where preachers and actors may tap back their chairs in the sun and enjoy what the other knows is largely unexplored’. She (Childers ibid:11) believes that theatre is the ‘closest cousin’ to preaching. Preaching is a theological event (Childers ibid:21) and, therefore, by its very nature, drama.

12. The word quietly puzzles scholars, because a divorce had to have witnesses and Mary’s pregnancy eventually and quickly would become well known. Furthermore, people would assume that her divorce was because of her adultery and the evidence of her adultery was the child (see Brown 1979:128). Brown (ibid 128) concludes that to divorce quietly may mean to divorce leniently. Decades later Jesus addresses the concept of divorce (Matt 1:19). However, specifically the Hebrew text and Shammai, who disputed Deuteronomium 24:1–4, Shammai interpreted the ‘something indecent’ portion of Deuteronomium 24:14 as marital unfaithfulness. Jesus upheld this view. Hillel interpreted the Deuteronomy text to mean that a man may divorce his wife for any infringement of his likes and dislikes — even if she burned the soup! Consequently, ‘most Jewish women must have lived in fear and uncertainty, because divorce may have meant a life of hardship, starvation and prostitution. Perhaps remembering his mother’s predicament, Jesus opted for Shammai’s version, yet added that God’s original plan was a lifelong union of one flesh between a man and a woman. Joseph, who became Jesus’ legal father, also chooses Shamma’s view and decides to divorce Mary because of her perceived marital unfaithfulness.

13. The Announcer invites the audience to imagine a small stone house. Both drama and religion engage the imagination and the dramatic instinct innate in people (see Ehrenspacher 1962:100).

14. The story begins. The details of the action, the structure of the dialogue and the various incidents (all causally related) form the plot of a play (DiYanni 2008:920).

15. Few scholars write on how Joseph learned about Mary’s pregnancy. Bailey (2008) and Barclay (1958) are the exceptions. Bailey (ibid:43–47) pauses to consider Joseph’s reactions to Mary’s pregnancy. Bailey (ibid:43) sees Matthew’s editorial comment – ‘being a just man’ (Matt 1:19) — as meaning that Joseph decided to break the Law of Moses and divorce his betrothed ‘quietly rather than exposing her’. Bailey considers this a bold act because it goes beyond the ethical expectations people normally follow when facing their circumstances. Bailey (ibid:44) speculates that Joseph followed the mode of Isaiah’s suffering servant (Is 42:1–6), who chooses not to break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick.

16. Von Balthasar (1992:ill:293) calls Mary’s position ‘exceptional’. Her life over the years has endured both mockery and ridicule just as she is an ‘answering woman’ (Von Balthasar ibid:ill:294) because of her response to Gabriel. For an excellent essay on the development of the analysis and importance of Mary throughout the ages, see Graham Harrison’s (Von Balthasar ibid:ill:360) translation.

17. The characters in a play may remind us of ourselves or differ from us. They may or may not appeal to us (DiYanni 2008:922). Mary and Joseph are both major characters because the action revolves around them. They are both dynamic
Joseph: I am so glad you are back from visiting your relative Elizabeth. You look so differently now and you returned yesterday, is that not right? [Joseph tenderly removes her headdress and/ or cool from her head and lets it fall gracefully on her shoulders.]

Mary: Yes, I did. It was a good trip. Elizabeth is pregnant and is due any day now.

Joseph: I had heard that! What awesome news! And at her age!

Mary: [Encouraged.] Yes! The Lord is truly moving again in the lives of his people!

Joseph: [His shoulders sag.] Israel has waited so long! We are so oppressed by the Romans! [He makes a spitting noise in disgust. Mary notices. She is calm and gentle. She moves slightly away.] The Messiah truly needs to come! [Mary nods a bit knowingly.]

Joseph: Yes. Well. Tell me about your trip. Won’t you sit down? [He smiles and steps closer to Mary.] I’m sure you told her about our wedding. It’s next month?[He seizes on one of the benches.

(Part 27 continues...) characters, because each grows and changes during the course of the play (DiYanni ibid:923). Truly, ‘character is the companion of plot’, because the actions of the characters propel the plot (DiYanni ibid:924).

18.According to tradition, Elizabeth and Zechariah lived in Ein Karem, about five miles west of Jerusalem and 80 miles from Nazareth (Holy Apostles Convent 1989:119).

19.Hospodar (1956:18) says Mary did not travel to Elizabeth ‘in haste’ (cum festivitate), but in a serious mood of mind (meta spoudes).

20.Themes common in an account of a super-hero’s birth, Brenner (1986:269) writes, are the barrenness of one mother and the unmarried social status of the other. Significantly, there is a lack of rivalry – no issues like beauty, ambition, age – between Elizabeth and Mary. Instead, the women are mutually supportive and share the commonality of faith. Brenner (1986:270) points out that the goodwill between Mary and Elizabeth enjoy sets the tone for the relationship of their sons by eliminating the possibility of power struggles between them in the future.

21.Mary has thought through what she must tell Joseph. She begins with her stay with her relatives, Elizabeth and Zechariah. Then, she call a subtext (DiYanni 2008:928). After telling the good news of Elizabeth’s pregnancy first, Mary will eventually tell her own good news to Joseph.

22.Imagination and improvisation are occurring, as Joseph’s words and actions show. However, I have kept within the boundaries the biblical text supplied. Joseph is a carpenter and he probably was in his shop working during the day. It is logical to assume that Mary saw him there. For example, Anderson (2006:15) points out that the Bible is not a history of ancient history. It is more to a sixteenth century form of drama that flourished in Italy, the commedia dell’arte. This kind of drama or comedy calls on actors to improvise and to put themselves into the story (Anderson ibid 15). Yes, there were some parts and the director gave an outline of what to do. However, with that said, the actors were ‘directed’ or told to improvise: they filled the gaps on their own (see Anderson ibid:15). Therefore, God becomes the Great Dramatist, one who invites a spectator down from the balcony to take part in the drama, with its boundaries, being improvised on stage (see Anderson ibid:15).

23.This play tells its story from the dramatic point of view through the words and actions of the players (Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:18). The actors’ words and actions interpret their unrevealed thoughts and feelings.

24.I have endeavoured throughout the play to indicate the tone using italics, stage directions, diction, various figures of speech and thought (see Greenblatt 2006: 456–460).

25.As Mary tells Joseph about her trip and the amazing things that have happened to her, she both speaks for herself and is the subject of the discussion. See Greenblatt (2006:2589–2590) for a fascinating essay on how women defended themselves in prose and verse against written attacks from men — and levelled a few volleys against the attackers.

26.The betrothal period was probably about a year. The betrothal because of the poverty of Joseph and Mary, probably entailed the simplest of dowries (Holy Apostles Convent 1989:69).

27.There were three steps in a Jewish marriage: the engagement (which might even have occurred when the couple were children), the betrothal and the marriage proper (which occurred at the end of the year of betrothal) (Barclay 1958:9). Significantly, a girl could choose not to become betrothed. However if she did, the betrothal was ‘absolutely binding’ and people knew the couple as husband and wife during that time although they had no marital rights. Only a divorce could end the betrothal. Here is more on Jewish marriage traditions: The man, the

Mary: Yes,29 We did talk a lot about our wedding. Elizabeth and I became quite close, Joseph, probably because wonderful things are happening to both of us.30

Joseph: Yes! She’s expecting a child—

Mary: [Interrupting.] Yes, a son!

Joseph: [Continuing.]— and at her great age.30

Mary: Yes! It’s quite a miracle for her and Zechariah! They are known as upright people in the sight of God.

Joseph: [Pausing, considering, and cocking his head.] Ah, Mary, you sound so certain that it is a son. You sound as if you know it is.

Mary: [Emphatically and confidently.] Well, yes, I do. It’s all involved in what I have to tell you. Elizabeth told me I had to talk to you.

Joseph: [is very pleased that she is here. He obviously enjoys her company and loves her.] Well, tell me about your stay! You left so suddenly and were there about three months, right?

Mary: [Mary rises.] Yes. You see, Joseph, an angel told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have a son.31 The meeting took place when Zechariah was serving in the Temple.32 Elizabeth and Zechariah

28.Throughout this conversation with Joseph, Mary displays an underlying sense of joy, an emotion consistent with the material contained in Luke 1 (see Craddock 1990:23–33).

29.One of the main sources of pleasure in a play is surprise (DiYanni 2008:921). In this play, the audience and Mary know more than Joseph knows. Joseph expresses many aspects of surprise throughout the drama.

30.Although Luke 1:6–7 emphasises the couple’s outstanding character, it also stresses their outstanding humiliation and outstanding need: they were childless! Childlessness was a valid reason for divorce — and even for excommunication. The rabbis said that seven kinds of people were excommunicated from God. The first two lead the list: ‘A Jew who has no wife or a few who has a wife and who has no child’ (Barclay 1956:4). According to Bauckham (2002:72), barrenness is the essential social fact about Elizabeth and her great, ongoing disgrace.


32.The stories of the births of John and Jesus are brought together. The Gospel of Matthew presents the situations surrounding Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem as filled with intrigue (see Burge, Cohick & Green 2009:169).

33.Mary was fortunate to have the guidance and confidence of Elizabeth, an older woman. Mary probably sought her counsel about how to tell her betrothed, Joseph, about her situation that definitely affects him: she is a virgin, yet pregnant. Drane (2011:55–57), however, discusses the difficulties modern readers have with the concept of a virgin birth: ‘To be a virgin and pregnant is a contradiction in terms’; he (Drane ibid:55) begins and that concept was ‘quite unacceptable in any form to orthodox Jews’ (Drane ibid:57). Matthew seems to draw from the LXX version of Isaiah, which translates 7:14 as virgin whilst in the Hebrew text the term may refer to a young woman (Drane ibid:56–57). Both Luke and Matthew present the material about Jesus’ birth in the same way that they present other material about Jesus: straightforwardly and without elaboration.

34.By this point in the play, we hope that those playing Joseph and Mary have forgotten that they are anybody but Joseph and Mary. Great theatre means that the actors experience a kind of self-forgetting. The actors, performers or preachers become so absorbed in what they are saying that the hows and whys of the material about Jesus’ birth in the Gospels are handled without attention.


36.Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah, was chosen by lot to minister to the Lord in the temple and burn incense. Whilst going about his duties, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and stood at the right side of the altar of incense (Lk 1:5, 8–9, 11). Gundry (2002:117) says that the division of Abijah was one of 24 divisions that served in the temple twice a year and for a week at a time.
are to name the child John.\textsuperscript{37} [She takes off her shawl/ cowl and neatly folds it. She places it on the corner of the work centre, stage left. It remains there until Joseph picks it up again at the end of the play.]

**Joseph:** An angel?\textsuperscript{38} [\textit{Laughing}\textsuperscript{39} and rising.] Our people have not seen angels since Gabriel interpreted a vision for Daniel.\textsuperscript{40} It concerned the end of time. Mmm. Zechariah is quite old, Mary, has he lost his mind? [Joseph walks stage left toward his other work centre.]

**Mary:** [\textit{Laughing and following him.}] No! He hasn’t lost his mind, but he has lost something else.

**Joseph:** [\textit{Laughing, too.}] Really! What?

**Mary:** [\textit{Slowly and looking at Joseph carefully.}] He’s lost his speech.

**Joseph:** What? His speech? Why?

**Mary:** [\textit{Quickly.}] The angel—and it was Gabriel—told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have a son in their old age.\textsuperscript{41} Zechariah did not believe it, and the angel silenced him.\textsuperscript{42}

**Joseph:** Amazing!

**Mary:** [\textit{Laughing}] Yes! He’s been listening to Elizabeth now for nine months! The angel said he would be silenced until the boy was born.

**Joseph:** [\textit{Still laughing.}] Well, good! He used to be so pompous\textsuperscript{43} [He walks stage right toward the other work centre.]

**Mary:** He has totally changed. I would say he has thought a lot about his encounter with Gabriel. Elizabeth and I would be working around the house and Zechariah would sit at the table, listen to us, and grunt every now and again. Every time he grunted, Elizabeth would hug and kiss him.

**Joseph:** [\textit{Laughing}] Well, good! But regarding angels, I’m not so sure! I never have had an encounter with an angel! So I’ll suspend judgment about Zechariah’s mental competency!\textsuperscript{44}

**Mary:** [\textit{Slowly}] Mmm. But Joseph, the evidence is there: Elizabeth is pregnant and expecting her child momentarily. Doesn’t that verify that Zechariah saw Gabriel?

**Joseph:** Well, I don’t know. It’s all pretty far-fetched to me. [\textit{Gesturing around the shop.}] I deal in realities like hard wood. I know what I make.

37. The child John will become more than a prophet, because he fulfils ‘the prophetic hope of Malachi 4:5–6 that Elijah would return before the day of the Lord’ (see Mal 3:1, Lk 7:26 and Matt 17:10–13; also see Burge et al. 2009:200).

38. Repetition, a tool in drama and in the biblical text, invites the audience to pause and consider the meaning and emphasis of the words or phrase (Dritsini 2008:922).

39. Laughter in a conversation between those soon to marry is normal. Von Balthasar (1988:1436) writes that ‘laughter is as much a part of life as weeping: the lighthearted game, the acted or narrated jest, the joke, good humor, poking fun at misconceptions, and inappropriate conduct, the delight we take in the unexpected and unhooped for that falls into our laps as a gift’.

40. Bock (1994:37) says that the major message of Gabriel’s visit to Zechariah and to Luke’s readers ‘is that God will do what he promises in his own way’.

41. Elizabeth and Zechariah’s son, John will, when he grows up, redirect those responding to his message toward a new walk with God (see Bock 1994:37).

42. See Craddock 1990:46.

43. The play notes Mary’s affection for Elizabeth and Zechariah. It seems that the miracle of Elizabeth’s pregnancy mollified the elderly priest, because ‘Luke introduces Zechariah as something of an old grump’ (Branch 2009:35).

44. Laughter is an important part of theatre. It is an act of reflection and occurs spontaneously. It comments on something or returns something in a tit-for-tat fashion. It may even punish a recognisable human failing (see Bergson 1924:197–198). To hit the mark, to make us laugh, it does not necessarily have to be kind-hearted (Bergson ibid:198).

45. One tradition is that the annunciation occurred when Joseph was absent from his home and working his trade as a builder (Holy Apostles Convent 1989:71). Another tradition is that Mary lived in the home of Joseph and that he was elderly (Holy Apostles Convent ibid:78).

46. In the theatre, a coincidence that keeps happening becomes a repetition and leads to laughter (see Bergson 1924:90).


48. Mary was not looking for God, but the angel Gabriel came to her (Talbert 1985:289).

49. Mary’s statements that all generations shall call her blessed and that He who is mighty has done great things for her do not reflect pride or vainglory, because she earlier called herself the handmaid of the Lord (Lk 1:48–49, 38; Holy Apostles Convent 1989:128). Mary links what is happening to her with the history of God’s workings with Israel when she sings ‘the Mighty One has done great things for me’ (O’Day 1985:208). In the gospel of Luke, Mary is a spirit-filled singer (Strauss 2007:265), as this play emphasises. This play does not contain the song of Zechariah, which comes after the circumcision of John and after Mary leaves the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. It is outside the scope of this play.

50. Deuteronomy 10:21 reflects praise that acknowledges God’s goodness, God’s actions and brings attention to God (Bock 1994:45). Mary’s hymn, or canticle, has similarities with the hymns of praise in the psalms, especially Psalms 33, 47, 48, 117 and 135 (Fitzmyer 1981:359). Deuteronomy’s 10:21 reflects Luke 1:49: ‘he has
Joseph: Well, Mary, tell me what the angel said.

Mary: [Walking around to give herself time.] He greeted me by saying I had found favour with God. Oh, first of all he told me not to fear.51 I guess that was out of courtesy, because he startled me; he arrived so suddenly.

Joseph: [Mystified, running his hand through his hair.] An angel arrived suddenly. Mmm. What were you doing, Mary?

Mary: [With bravado. She is very positive.] Well, nothing much. Just sort of sitting and sewing.52 [She goes to a bench, sits, and pantomimes the encounter.] I remember dropping my sewing.53 It was then he told me not to be afraid and that I had found favour with God.

Joseph: [With bravado. He is very positive. He speedily comes to her at the bench and kneels. He takes her hand.] Well, of course, you would find favour with God! Everybody knows you are the best young woman in all Nazareth! Everybody respects you.54

Mary: Mmm.

Joseph: [Confident now and in control.] Well, what else did the angel say?

Mary’s shocking announcement

Mary: [Taking a deep breath and looking at Joseph.] The angel said this: ‘You will be with child and give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus.’

Joseph: [Relieved and pleased. Joseph is choosing to believe her. He rises and walks during these lines as he thinks through what Mary has told him.] My goodness, Mary! We will have a son! That’s wonderful news! It’s interesting that we are to name him Jesus! His name means The Lord Saves! What a famous son he will be. Think of it! Our son.

Mary: Yes, he will be famous, Joseph. [She nods at him intently.]

Joseph: There’s more, isn’t there, Mary. [She nods. He senses the soberness of the event.] Well, tell me.

51. Conrad (1985:660–663) explores the relationship between fear not and behold. Fear not! is a common command when a heavenly visitor interrupts an earthly scene. Frequently the word Behold! (hinneh) introduces such an encounter in the Old Testament. Behold is a textual marker, a word indicating special emphasis and alerting the hearer or reader that something important is about to be spoken or take place. The Greek equivalent for ‘behold’ is ἔρµατε. The angel greets Mary with ‘Do not be afraid’ (ἀνήρµατε, Mary). Behold is omitted. The angel appears to Joseph in a dream also with behold (adon). Conrad (ibid:661) says that ‘fear not’ in the New Testament ‘seeks to eliminate the fear aroused not only by the appearance of the numinous, but also by other circumstances associated with the announcement of the birth of a son’.52

52. In contrast to the electricity associated with Zechariah’s encounter with Gabriel, a simple calmness dominates the angel’s visit to Mary (see Bock 1994:39).

53. Commenting on Gabriel’s sudden appearance, Gomes (1998:10) quips ‘that the angel Gabriel has a lot less to do for it is he who interrogates what we might imagine to be the ordinary routine of the life of this young woman about to be married to a carpenter of Nazareth’.54

54. This drama does not mention the legends about Mary that include her delayed birth, her holiness, her childhood and her participation with other virgins in making the veil of the temple. For a fascinating account of them see Holy Apostles Convent 1989:1–73.

Mary: [She begins to walk quickly. She touches her head and then her belly. She seems to be talking to herself. She ends with a prayer with her hands raised and her eyes toward heaven.] Elizabeth said to just tell him straight. Oh, God, be my help!55

Joseph: [Taken aback. Absolutely amazed. He looks around and glances toward the open door. He whispers loudly.] What? Mary! You are speaking blasphemy! Shh! The neighbours might hear!

Mary: [Positively. Honestly. Forthrightly.] No, I am not! I am telling you the truth. I’m telling you what happened. Please believe me, Joseph. [She pauses and slowly continues.] Elizabeth and Zechariah did.

Joseph: [He moves away, stays standing, and folds his arms across his chest.] Continue.

Mary: [Understanding the body language.] The angel kept saying wonderful things about this son, Jesus. He said, ‘The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.’

Joseph: Well, you and I both are from the house and lineage of David.56 My line comes through his son Solomon and yours through Solomon’s brother Nathan, also David’s son.57

Mary: Yes, Solomon and Nathan were the sons of David and Bathsheba.

Joseph: [Musing. Talking to himself. Walking around. He begins to talk things out slowly.] So if what you say is true, God is on the move and will restore the Kingdom of Israel once again!58 Mary, this is

55. What Mary says here, a prayer and a remembrance, is an aside (DiTullio 2008:925). I wrote this play with this concept in mind. Mary is living out theology as it develops. So is Joseph. They are human beings whom God is using remarkably. Theology encourages its followers to learn from others. Steuernagel learns from Mary. For him (Steuernagel 2003:104), ‘The theologian Mary walks around showing off her pregnant womb to help us understand that theology becomes mature in the active expectancy of the fulfillment of God’s actions. It’s theology with the gesture of vocation, pointing towards an obedient discipleship.’

56. Matthew’s birth narrative presents the theme that this child, Jesus, is the promised Messiah and will bring salvation to his people (Strauss 2007:224). Matthew 1:16–25 highlights the facts that follow. Jesus is born into the household of Joseph, a descendent of David (1:16, 20). Bethlehem is the prophesied birthplace of the upcoming Davidic king (1:13; Mic 5:2). The baby’s name, Jesus, Yeshua, means Yeshua saves (1:21). The virgin birth confirms the prophetic word in Isaiah that ‘the Lord Saves’ (1:23). The baby’s name, Jesus, ‘may not correspond to the image of the Messiah for whom Israel was waiting’ (Spivey et al. ibid:92).

57. Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew contains five women — Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah the Hittite and Mary — perhaps setting the tone for the possibility of the unexpected in Matthew (Spivey et al. ibid:92). The Christ that Matthew presents ‘may not correspond to the image of the Messiah for whom Israel was waiting’ (Spivey et al. ibid:92).

58. Matthew 1:1–17 shows the line of Jesus. It starts with Abraham and ends with ‘and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ’. Matthew 1:23–37 begins: ‘Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heliodorus (v. 13). 2 Chronicles 3:1–16 gives the line of David. Verse 5 is noteworthy for this play: ‘And these were the children born to (David) there: Solomon and yours through Solomon’s brother Nathan, also David’s son.’

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Joseph: Oh, Mary! I believe you! You could not have made me happier! The King of Israel is coming! God will restore Israel! God will restore Israel through us. Joseph continues to be very happy. Mary is very silent. Joseph notices. He lowers his hands and turns to her. Mary, there is more, isn’t there?

Mary: Yes. [She turns to Joseph.] Joseph, my betrothed, my darling, I must tell you what more the angel said.

Joseph: [Smiling and very happy.] Continue! I believe you! I am excited!

Mary: Joseph, the angel did not mention you. [Joseph is startled.]


Mary: [Kindly, taking her hands.] Mary, I have no doubt you are a virgin. I trust you completely. The whole town knows your character. Ah, we will be great parents of the great king!

Mary: Yes. Well, I asked how I could have a son since I am a virgin. The angel answered that the Holy Spirit will come upon you.

Joseph: What? [Dropping her hands.] What does that mean? The Holy Spirit will come upon you?

Mary: [Patiently and trying to understand it herself.] Well, it’s hard to explain, but it happened. Let me continue telling you what the angel told me. The

Joseph: [Puzzled, drawing away.] What? The Most High will overshadow you? ‘So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.’ What do those statements mean?

Mary: I’ll tell you. But let me continue what the angel said. Then the angel immediately told me that my relative Elizabeth was going to have a child in her old age and was in her sixth month. It was as if Elizabeth’s pregnancy was to be a sign that everything the angel said was true.

Joseph: Well, Elizabeth is pregnant.

Mary: [Taking a deep breath, walking over to him.] Joseph, this is what I must tell you. I am pregnant.

Joseph’s anger

Joseph: [Astounded!] What? [Many emotions cross his face.] Disbelief. Amazement. Anger, especially anger. He backs away from Mary. He storms around the stage. He rubs his hand through his hair. He returns to Mary. Pregnant? You? Who has done this? Who has defiled my betrothed?

Mary: No man has defiled me. No one has raped me. I am still a virgin.

Joseph: [Loudly. Beginning to show anger.] But how can you be pregnant?

Mary: [Also loudly.] It was as the angel said. The Holy Spirit came upon me. The power of the Most High overshadowed me. I am pregnant. I am in my third month. I am a virgin.

67.In the Luke account, the phrase ‘Son of God’, which applies to Mary’s child, links to Adam as well (Lk 3:38) (Burge et al. 2009:200).

68.With regard to the angel’s visit, Gomes (1998:10) writes that “it is not an easy thing to be confronted with a message from God.” It is also not an easy thing to say yes to God. Gomes (ibid:10) adds that those who say yes to God, Moses, Abraham, Isaiah, Jeremiah and now Mary, find themselves annoyed “not so much at their own unworthiness for such a high calling, for that would come later but annoyed at the more practical level of inconvenience.” Mary’s pregnancy is, at times, very inconvenient, as this play illustrates.

69. The Proteoevangelion, which records the interview between Joseph and Mary, recounts Joseph’s distress, his view that she has been seduced, Mary’s tears and his confrontational manner to his betrothed (see Holy Apostles Convent 1989:134–135; Proteoevangelion: The Lost Books of the Bible 1966).

70. Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth shows Joseph’s embarrassment at the prospect of the birth of Jesus before he consummates his marriage with Mary (Spivey et al. 2010:90).

71. Evans (2006:217–218) recounts a polemic against Christianity that Celsius wrote in the late second century AD. Amongst other things, Celsius claims that a Roman soldier named Pantera, or Panthera, impregnated Mary. Later rabbinic literature (Tosefta Hullin 2.22–24) also includes this story (Evans ibid:218).

72. Brown’s (1979:124) explanation of her virginity, though dated, is still outstanding. I quote it in full. “There is never a suggestion in Matthew or in Luke that the Holy Spirit is the male element in a union with Mary, supplying the husband’s role in begetting. Not only is the Holy Spirit not male (feminine in Hebrew; neuter in Greek), but also the manner of begetting is implicitly creative rather than sexual.”

73. Bailey (2008:44–46) picks up, as I do, on Joseph’s anger, although Bailey calls it Joseph’s ‘fuming’. He sees the passage, as I do, as showing that Joseph is extremely upset over Mary’s condition. It disrupts his life. It shames him. The root of the Greek word for ‘he considered’ (enthimnomai) (Matt 1:20) is thymos, wrath. Matthew uses it shortly thereafter to describe the rage of Herod upon discovering that the wise men had tricked him by leaving Bethlehem without reporting to him where the child lived (Matt 2:16).

74. Here Mary shows her complexity and the complex situation she faces (see Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:13).
Yet you are...[Stunned.] That’s impossible! [Shakily, L:] I do not believe you. I cannot believe you.

Mary: [I am pregnant. I am a virgin. I am in my third month.]

Joseph: [Indeed. Mary, Mary! We are pledged to be married! In Israel, that is the same as being married! We have not come together – and I was so looking forward to our wedding night when I could make you my own.

Mary: [Yes, I have dreamed of that, too.

Joseph: [Angry. Laughing in a sneering way.] Yet you are pregnant! You say you are in your third month. You say you are a virgin. A virgin! Ha! [Proudly, Honestly] No man has known me. I have been faithful to you, my betrothed. Yes, I am a virgin. Yes, I am pregnant.

Joseph: [Almost screaming.] You lie! What you say is impossible!

Mary: [Also loudly, but honestly and with confidence.] No! And no again! Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth believe me. [Desperately] Zechariah went to the Isaiah scroll and rolled it out. He pointed to this obscure prophecy from Isaiah and indicated I should share it with you: Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

75 A church tradition is that Joseph asks Mary the same question that God earlier asked Eve, ‘Why hast thou done this?’ [Gen 3:13; Holy Apostles Convent 1989:134–135].

76 Strauss (2007:415) discusses the theological significance of the virginal conception this way: ‘Some have argued it was necessary to protect Jesus’ sinless nature, but the narratives themselves do not indicate this purpose. The Messiah could have entered human life free from sin with or without a virginal conception. Nor is Scripture explicit on the details of the conception. Did God create the sperm for Mary’s egg? Did he create a fertilized embryo? This latter question raises questions about how Jesus could have avoided Mary’s sinful nature. The Roman Catholic answer is the immaculate conception, whereby Mary herself was born free from sin. However, this doctrine has no basis in Scripture. In the final analysis, the details remain a mystery. What is certain from the text is that the conception of Jesus was a supernatural act of God, confirming that God himself was about to accomplish the salvation which no human being could achieve.’ I do not believe that Mary was sinless. This play presents her as a strong, normal young woman. I certainly agree that mystery abounds in the infancy narratives, but the stories in Luke and Matthew give us enough on which to base our faith. It is a firm foundation. We know enough to trust the Lord. Deuteronomy 29-29 says ‘The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.’

77 Brown (1979:127–128) acknowledges that some may be offended that Joseph could regard Mary as an adulteress. However, ‘among first-century Christians of Jewish origin this would in no way distract from his upright character’.

78 Joseph immediately assumes she has been unfaithful (Brown 1979:127). Nothing Mary says from here on changes his view. After Joseph decides to divorce Mary because of her perceived unfaithfulness, an unspecified length of time occurs. The Bible does not state how long – a day, a week, an evening or an hour. It lasts until an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph and addresses Joseph’s assumption of Mary’s unfaithfulness. The angel commands Joseph not to fear to take Mary, his wife, into his home. The angel’s statement makes it clear that Mary has not broken the law and become an adulteress (Brown ibid.127). The angel of the Lord puts to rest Joseph’s concern that Mary broke the law (Matt 1:20–21).

79 The betrothal meant that people treated the couple as married. However, there had been no consummation. Consequently, marriage, inheritance, death, adultery and divorce were handled according to the law. Only a divorce could dissolve the betrothal, as with a marriage (Holy Apostles Convent 1989:69).

80 Dihello also does not believe Desdemona’s story or her innocence. He calls her foul and claims her charity is cold (Shakespeare 2008:1094, 272–273).

81 Zechariah and Elizabeth represent the best of Israel. They show that there was true piety, based not on meticulous legalism, but on practiced prayer in Israel (Dean 1983:20).

82 Isaiah 7:14 and Murphy (2005:145) point out that Matthew’s choice of virgin shows that he follows the Greek text and not the Hebrew.

83 The child Mary carries is the fulfilment of God’s design because a prophet had spoken generally of how the Messiah would come (Burge et al. 2009:169). See Deuteronomy 22:23–24: ‘If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and rapes her, only the man who has done this shall die. Do nothing to the girl; she has committed no sin deserving of death. This case is like that of someone who attacks and murders his neighbor, for the man who defiles you to pay the 50 shekels to your father and marry you, you, the violated one.

84 See Deuteronomy 22:22.

85 Joseph is trying to find a way out of this pregnancy. He mentions Deuteronomy 22:23–24: ‘If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death — the girl, because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man, because he violated another man’s wife. You must purge the evil from among you.’ The biblical text hints at what Joseph may be thinking and his dilemma, because it calls him a just man. Concealing an act of fornication or adultery makes one complicit in breaking the law. Joseph did not believe that he ethically could conceal what he determined was her sin of adultery (see Holy Apostles Convent 1989:138).

86 Mary sticks to her story. She keeps affirming the truth of what happened to her. Joseph does not believe her. I hope that the audience now begins to see the polarisation of the two sides and to sympathise with both. A critical feature of drama is its mimetic nature: drama is interactive (see DiYanni 2008:900).

87 Joseph brings up Deuteronomy 22:25: ‘But if out in the country a man happens to meet a girl pledged to be married and rapes her, only the man who has done this shall die. Do nothing to the girl; she has committed no sin deserving of death. This case is like that of someone who attacks and murders his neighbor, for the man found the girl out in the country, and though the betrothed girl screamed, there was no one to rescue her.

88 Barclay (1958:9) writes that ‘if Joseph wished to end the betrothal, he could do so in no other way than by divorce; and in that year of betrothal Mary was legally known as his wife’.

89 Joseph also knows this law (see Dt 22:28–29): ‘If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay the girl’s father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the girl, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives.’ The custom was that an engagement consisted of a formal and witnessed agreement to marry and the payment of the bride price to the father of the bride. The marriage and its celebration and its consummation happened a year later (see Burge et al. 2009:200).
much, Joseph."

Joseph: [Shouting.] Stoning, Mary, stoning! [Mary lifts her chin and looks levelly at Joseph. Joseph adopts a pleading attitude.] Mary, the law for a betrothed woman is the same as that for a married woman. Mary, you are deceived! Mary, admit it to me: You broke the Law! You committed adultery.

Mary: No, Joseph. I cannot lie. I am a virgin. No man has come near me. I am pregnant.

Joseph: [Derision.] And you are pregnant. Who can possibly believe you? Who can possibly believe your, er, story, your explanation?

Mary: [Lifting her chin again. Composed. Smiling while remembering a happy memory.] Elizabeth did without my saying a word.

Joseph: [A derisive grunt.] Elizabeth!

Mary: [Knowing the battle, so to speak, is lost, but still calm, gracious, and loving.] As soon as I arrived, Elizabeth started talking. Actually she started shouting.

Joseph: [Patronisingly.] Well, what did she say?

Mary: [Remembering a good memory, she smiles with fondness.] Elizabeth said to me, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!' Then Elizabeth wondered something very unusual. She said, 'Why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?'

Joseph: [The mother of my Lord?] [Aghast.] Mary, I am calling you the mother of God?

Mary: Yes, I guess she is. I hadn't really thought of it that way. But yes, that is what she was saying. I agree. It is amazing.

Joseph: Mary, everything you say about Elizabeth is against our culture. You are younger! She is the elder! You should be honouring her! Again, you are deceived, deceived!

Mary: [Sadly, because the man she loves does not understand.] No, I am not deceived. I agree that what I am telling you is hard to understand. Then something funny happened. [Mary's face softens.] Elizabeth started holding her belly. She started laughing! There was lots of activity in her belly.

Joseph: [Not understanding.] How so?

Mary: Elizabeth told me that as soon as I called out her name, the baby in her womb started leaping for joy! She was filled with the Holy Spirit and started prophesying.

Joseph: [Incredulous.] Prophe sing! No woman has prophesied in Israel since Huldah in good king Josiah's time.

90. With this statement, Mary shows that part of the drama in this play involves practical theology. In technical terms, it is action-reflection and theory-praxis (see Faley 1968:437). If one holds with Mary's perpetual and timeless view of the holy, as she speaks of those whom God exalts at the expense of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, her virginity remains intact (see Brown 1979:127).

91.瑟勒斯洛和沃尔森（2008:17）指出，‘信号’是通常被理解的，因此，在一个一定的关系中，根据信号，它和关系中的人物的关系是，根据关系和关系中的角色的关系，无论是否是。Mary, everything you say about Elizabeth is against our culture. You should be honouring her! Again, you are deceived, deceived!

92. However, Mary has not broken the law, because she conceived through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, her virginity remains intact (see Brown 1979:127).

93. Throughout the encounter with Joseph, difficult as it is, Mary conducts herself with a diabolical delight and an absolute order. Her words and actions clearly show a man distraught, disappointed and very angry.

94. A view that has widespread influence in Catholic theology is that Mary preferred virginity even after marriage (Cerove 1957:329). Cerove (ibid:329, 342) argues that Joseph later agreed even after their official marriage. Mary may have resisted conjugal relations because of spiritual motives. Cerove (ibid:344) believes that Mary's response to Gabriel's words was to be greatly troubled (Lk 1:29) and Joseph was perplexed (Matt 1:19–20). Cerove (ibid:342) concludes that 'there is a natural mystery in many human decisions, and in particular those regarding state of life.' It seems to me that the biblical text gives scant support to Cerove's view. For example, Mark 3:31–35 talks about Jesus' mother and, as was the case for Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an abolitionist; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian; and Jeannete Noel, a woman involved with the Catholic Worker newspaper.

95. From her touch and with both hands pushes her away. Elizabeth adopted a solemn, dignified, firm and healthy attitude. It seems that Elizabeth's filling by the Holy Spirit later formalised it (Faley 1968:437). If one holds with Mary's perpetual and timeless view of the holy, as she speaks of those whom God exalts at the expense of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, her virginity remains intact (see Brown 1979:127).

96. Elizabeth speaks as a prophet (Dean 1983:23).

97. Fitzmyer (1981:358) notes that Elizabeth gives a blessing and a beatitude over her young kinswoman. Firstly, Mary is blessed (eulogism) amongst women because of whom she carries in her womb. Secondly, she is blessed (makaria) because of her faith. With regard to Luke 1:39–45, Dean (1983:23–24) summarises my view nicely: 'Mary was a willing channel of divine blessings to others.'


99. Some view the doctrine that Mary is the Mother of God as the most important truth about Mary. Scripture, tradition, the teaching and authority of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches support this (see Holy Apostles Convent 1989:123–124).

100. Luke's account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth distinguishes the roles of the sons the two pregnant women bear. John will be a prophet to the Most High (Lk 1:76) and Mary's son, Jesus, will be the Son of the Most High (Lk 1:32). See Strauss (2007:264–265) for an excellent and succinct explanation of the different roles, functions and ranks of these two baby boys.

101. The concept of theotokos (literally God-bearer) is not to give glory to the mother 'but to guarantee that the life of Jesus was from its inception due to God's act' (Hallert 1985:291). Gomes (1998:15) argues that Mary, in her call from God and in her response to that call, 'becomes the mother not only of Jesus but of our vocation, and of our calling as well. She shows us that it is possible for us to be gifted ones with her, the bearers of Christ in our world'.

102. We learn theology on the knife-edge of life. Theology must kneel at the cross, face death, wait for resurrection and adjust to a new season in God's salvific plan. As Steuernagel (2003:110) notes, in his study of Mary, she stood by at the foot of the cross decades later.

103. Actually, Elizabeth correctly honoured Mary, because the son Mary was carrying outranked the son in Elizabeth's womb. The meeting of these four — the two mothers and their two sons — produces 'a new tradition of a super-hero's birth' (Brenner 1986:269).

104. See Luke 1:44. The leaping of the baby John is a prophetic action (Fitzmyer 1981:357). The leaping and the movement of the unborn child in Elizabeth's womb 'is intended as a recognition by him of his relation to Jesus', Fitzmyer (ibid:363) notes. Luke seems to intend a parallel with the matriarch Rebecca. The LXX recounts Genesis 25:22, a similar in-the-womb moment and notes that Rebecca's twin leapt (eskiton) (Fitzmyer ibid:363). The two sons in this part of the story, John and Jesus, meet in their mothers' wombs. They are coming, by God's mercy, into history. Decades later, one proclaims the upcoming salvation and One is that salvation and takes people into that salvation (see Bock 1994:53).

105. See Luke 1:41–45. The Holy Spirit works in families. First Elizabeth was filled and then her husband Zechariah (Lk 1:41, 67). Luke makes it clear that the words and views of Elizabeth and, later in the chapter, those of Zechariah 'are not simply their own; they sing and prophesy about their son and Jesus in speech inspired by the Holy Spirit' (Cradock 1990:32).

Mary: [Confidentially. Straightening her shoulders and lifting her chin.] Yes, indeed. Elizabeth prophesied this about me: ‘Blessed is she who has believed what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!’

Joseph: It’s almost the same as what you said the angel said.

Mary: Yes. The angel greeted me by calling me highly favoured. Their similar words and attitude toward me give me courage to go on.

Joseph: [Suddenly thinking there might be a way out of this dilemma. He loves her and here exhibits a beseeching manner.] Mary. Mary. Maybe you are not pregnant. I’ll give you a chance. Young girls don’t have regular cycles. Let’s agree to this: We’ll wait and see.

Mary: Joseph, I cannot agree to that, because I already agreed to something else.

Joseph: [Sternly.] What did you agree to, Mary? You know that I as your betrothed am to be consulted on your vows.

Mary: [Slowly.] Well, when the angel came to me, he told me what I’ve told you. I was troubled. I was silent. I kept looking up at him and down at my hands. He gave me time to consider a response. [Sighing and laughing.] I felt as if all creation held its breath.

Joseph: [Slowly.] Well, what did you say?

Mary: Looking at Joseph, I told the angel this: ‘I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.’ Then I curtsied and bowed my head. I don’t know why I did that, but I felt as if I were in the presence of royalty. [Laughs quietly and kindly while Joseph looks on and shakes his head.]

Joseph: [Pausing.] Well, what happened next?

Mary: Then the angel left me, and I decided to go quickly to see Elizabeth. [They look at each other. Joseph paces. It is evident that he is a man with conflicting emotions. Gradually his face hardens. Mary sees it and raises her chin.]

Joseph: Mary, I could have you stoned. [Mary is alarmed, but nods her head.]

Mary: Yes. The angel greeted me by calling me highly favoured. Their similar words and attitude toward me will give me courage to go on.

Joseph: [Petulantly.] Well, what is it?

Mary: [Quietly, confidentially.] The Lord is speaking. The Lord says, ‘Behold, I will do a new thing.’

Mary: [Crying.] Oh, Joseph, oh, Joseph, no. You are a just man.

Joseph: [Shaking his head and his hand at her.] No! There is no new thing! You have committed adultery against me. I dissolve our marriage contract because of your unfaithfulness. That is my verdict. I will have a divorce decree written privately. You are free to go – [derisively] – to go back to your lover! Leave me. Leave my house! You, the one I loved so much! You have made your father’s name an abomination in Israel.

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Joseph: It is because I am a just man that I cannot marry you.111 I cannot say the child is mine.112 [Derisively. Brokenly. Defantly.] The only ‘new thing’ I will believe is if an angel comes to me, too.113 [Mary leaves quickly, obviously broken.114] She exists through the open, imaginary door. She freezes with her back to the audience, upstage left. Joseph watches her.

(footnote 119 continues ...) Joseph’s action of choosing divorce showed that he was just and merciful (Brown ibid:127).

120. The medieval pageant play, The Annunciation, portrays Joseph as an elderly man who refuses to believe Mary’s story (Cawley 1959:74–76). He thinks he has played his fool. Knowing the child is not his, Joseph says, ‘Forsooth, this child, dame, is not mine. Alas, that ever with mine eyeene I should see this sight! So much as I have cherished thee, dame, and all thy kin, Behind my back to serve me thus.’ (lines 130–133)

Joseph then lies down to rest. An angel visits him, commanding him to arise and take Mary home again. He is to comfort her because she is clean and has conserved the Second Person of the Trinity. Joseph goes to Mary in haste, kneels before her, and asks her forgiveness. He says, ‘Ih, Mary, Mary, I kneel full low; Forgive me, sweet wife, here in this land. Mercy, Mary, for now I know of your good governance and how it doth stand.’ (lines 155–159)

Mary replies, ‘Now, that lord in heaven, sir, he you forgive; And I do forgive you in your name For everyone.’ (lines 165–166)

Joseph’s doubt is a familiar theme in English pageantry and drama. Cawley (1959:69) notes that themes like Joseph’s doubt and Joseph’s troubles with Mary occur in English drama cycles.

121. The theme of the play follows. Joseph, because he is a just man, cannot say the child is his. The playing of the play (see O’Harrow 2008:934) is that he does not believe Mary’s story and must have a supernatural confirmation. Bock (2002:64) notes that the Matthew infancy narrative presents the dilemma as how shameful it appeared to Joseph. The shame is contained in Matthew 1:20. However, before they could talk together, she was pregnant through the Holy Spirit (italics added). Bock (2002:64) continues that, because honour drives the culture, it is virtually required that ‘he who would become the Announcer is what one calls a static character because he remains the same throughout the play’ (Bock ibid:64). However, I wonder how ‘quietly’ a divorce could be. Who would marry her? Where would she go? Would her parents take her back into their home? How would she care for the child? Quite likely, Mary wondered these and other things when Joseph told her he would divorce her. The Bible records no angelic visitation to Mary to comfort her, no hugs from Elizabeth and her kinsfolk who are miles away and no friends to whom Joseph could go or in whom she could confide. The Bible shows another of its consistent silences from this perspective. Its silence perfectly suits the culture, and the text shows perfectly suited by the Bible does nothing to comfort. God had already spoken to Mary. God had said enough through his trusted representatives, Gabriel and Elizabeth. Mary already had the sure prophetic word. Despite her current circumstances — Joseph’s refusal to believe her and his decision to divorce her and the subsequent life-threatening prospects that might bring — the command and promise of Gabriel hold true: ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God’ (Lk 1:30). William Blake, the English mystic, poet and artist, held a different view. He interpreted Matthew 1 as showing that Jesus was related to Joseph in spirit and quite possibly in the flesh (Phipps 1971:178). For Blake, if Jesus were indeed Joseph’s blood son, ‘he could be the acclaimed the God-man regardless of his physical mode of generation’ (Phipps ibid:178). However, this view seems to me to contradict the statements in Luke 1 and Matthew 1 about the divine nature of Jesus’ conception in Mary’s womb.

122. This play deliberately portrays Joseph as angry. He expresses his feelings of betrayal and loathing. Mary’s declaration seemingly shatters his dreams. Bailey (2008:46) notes that theology begins with unexpected encounters set in the messy confines of day-to-day lives. Joseph’s encounter with an angel in a dream changes his theology!

123. The Announcer is what one calls a static character because he remains the same (Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:14). The Announcer is from the Holy Spirit. The Matthew account adds these words: He will save his people from their sins (Mark 1:9). Bock (2002:64) notes that Joseph’s naming Jesus considered legally qualified to inherit David’s throne. Joseph’s naming Jesus because of Joseph’s descent from David, Jesus is born into a Davidic family and the Mattthean narrative portrayal of him’ (Bock ibid:64).)

124. As Bock (2002:64) says, ‘Joseph’s plans are stopped by a dream.’ This is one of several direct interventions in these two chapters (v. 18, 21, 22). The Magi are warned not to return to Herod (Matt 1:12). Because the audience sees and knows more than the characters on the stage do (Ehrenprenger 1962:52), what is be happening on the stage may not necessarily be said.

125. A direct intervention step outside of the so-called ‘normality’ of the situation. The Announcer is what one calls a static character because he remains the same (Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:14).

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Conclusion

Announcer: Luckily, the story does not end that way.124 Yes, Joseph sets his terms, and God meets them.125 An angel visits Joseph, too.126 Listen as Matthew continues the story.127

[Opens the Bible.] Matthew 1:20–25: ‘But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’128 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,129 because he will save his people from their sins.

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, “God with us.” When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.130 And he gave him the name Jesus.131 [Closes the Bible.]

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127. The Announcer is what one calls a static character because he remains the same (Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:14).

128. Gundry (2003:170) emphasises the importance of this passage: ‘As a result and because of Joseph’s descent from David, Jesus is born into a Davidic family and considered legally qualified to inherit David’s throne. Joseph’s naming Jesus indicates an acceptance of Jesus as his legal son.’

129. Hare (1993:12) writes that Joseph’s role was simply to acknowledge this part of the miracle by naming the child.

130. Joseph takes Mary into his house (Matt 1:20), thereby establishing the legal Davidic lineage of Jesus (France 1989:77). Hare (1993:11) explains that, for Matthew, Jesus must be recognised as the son of Joseph ‘because only so was he an authentic descendant of David’. He (Hare ibid:11–12) adds that ‘for Matthew, God’s miraculous action in causing the pregnancy included the miraculous incorporation of the child into Joseph’s family’ (Hare’s italics).

131. Citing the verse, ‘And Joseph knew her not’ (Matt 1:25), Saint Ephrem is amongst those who praise the ‘episcopal virginity of Mary and her abstention from marital relations. Others include Saint Basil, Saint Chrysostom and Jerome (see Holy Apostles Convent 1989:148–149). Joseph cared for her all her life and the children associated with his household are his children from an earlier marriage. However, with regard to Matthew 1:24–25, France (1989:80) believes that the Greek phrase not is ‘certainly suggests ‘that intercourse did not take place until’ after Jesus’ birth. Therefore, when Matthew later talks about Jesus’ brothers (Matt 12:46), they are the children born subsequent to the new family of Joseph and Mary. There is no biblical warrant for the tradition of the ‘perpetual virginity’ of Mary (France 1989:80) concludes.

132. This birth announcement follows what has become standard procedure in the biblical text. The birth announcement to Joseph, evidently something he needed for him to believe, commends Joseph by addressing him as a descendant (indeed a son) of David and addressing his fears of taking Mary home with him (Matt 1:20). The angel’s words to Joseph and his family are related, in part, to Mary’s special status as a woman ‘of the Holy Spirit. The Matthew account adds these words. He will save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21)."
You know, the Bible in this passage gives another summary of a silence. It does not record the angel’s encounter with Joseph in a dream. It does not record Joseph’s conversation with Mary. It does not recount when Joseph tells Mary of his own encounter with an angel. It summarizes all these meetings. But the Bible invites us to imagine them.

[A pantomime begins for Joseph and Mary.] From the biblical text we see that Joseph must have believed the angel. [Joseph raises his head, listens, and indicates agreement.] Joseph must have gone to Mary. [Joseph gets up, runs through the imaginary door, and walks to Mary.] He must have told her of the encounter. [Joseph pantomimes the dream.]

Joseph must have asked for forgiveness. [Joseph bows or kneels and looks up at Mary.] And Mary must have given his forgiveness. [Mary indicates her forgiveness; she caresses his bowed head. Joseph rises reflec. Joining hands, they twirl. Mary smiles. They stop. Joseph bows and offers his arm.] Mary takes it. Together they come through the open door and join the Announcer at centre stage.

And the story goes on. [All three bow.]

133. Saint Germanos agrees with the timeframe this play gives. Everything occurred very quickly. Joseph changed his views within a day. The verification he needs comes in a dream from an angel. Joseph immediately repents, goes to Mary and even bows before her (Holy Apostles Convent 1989:142). Saint Germanos, in his homily, acknowledges that Joseph said, ‘Yesterday I had false suspicions and brought censure upon thy beauty and goodness. But today, having received a word from above, I apostrophise and venerate thy magnanimity and bless thee name’ (Holy Apostles Convent 1989:142). Saint Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople, Sermon on the Announcement of the Most Holy Theotokos (in Greek), page 98.

134. Joseph has four dreams that Matthew recounts. They propel the plot forward and confirm that God is in charge and protecting the child, Joseph and Mary. In addition to Joseph’s first encounter with an angel (Matt 1:20–21), Joseph has three more dreams. The first guides him to escape with his family to Egypt (Matt 2:13). The second guides him to return to Israel after Herod’s death (2:20). The third guides him to settle in Nazareth (Matt 2:22). An angel also warns the Magi, the wise men from the East, in a dream not to return to Herod (Matt 2:12). Matthew does not name the angel of the Lord. Luke names the angel that visited Zechariah in the Temple and Mary as Gabriel (Lk 1).

135. This play uses imagination within the framework the biblical text supplies. The active imagination of a person (at any age) provides a great tool for training in the faith (see Stonehouse 1998:158).

136. While I was writing this pantomime, I remembered Pitzele’s (1998:243–245) three warnings about bibl-drama:
1. At times, a director usurps a priest or rabbi, but a director can be a loose cannon amongst the keepers of the canon.
2. Be aware that bibl-drama may make one too much a slave to the theatre and what may please an audience.
3. Bibl-drama may concentrate too much on the needs of the present and not enough on honouring the biblical text. In words to himself and to others who love both the theatre and the biblical text, Pitzele (1998:245) wisely points to the value of peer review critics and of a sceptical and vocal community.

137. Please note that the angel is unnamed. Perhaps it was Gabriel.

138. Joseph risks scandal by marrying Mary. He does so because he has heard from an angel himself and has decided that he can honourably marry this pregnant woman because an illegitimate child could not enter the assembly of the Lord (Deut 23:2). Significantly, the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus’ later enemies, never taunted him about being born out of wedlock or that his mother played the harlot in Israel. However, another tradition is that both Mary and Joseph had to drink the waters of conviction (Num 5:11–30) to verify that Mary had not conceived the child she

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Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced her when she wrote this article.

References


Notes

Footnote 141 continues ... carried in adultery or out of wedlock. Both took the waters, both went separately into the hill country for the appointed time and both returned! The priest who administered the test said, ‘If the Lord God did not make manifest your sin, neither will I judge you, or send you to the holy apostle’s convenant’ (ibid:ibV-V:366). To experience a play — its writing, rehearsals, performances and reception — can engage the imagination, the will and the direction of a life (see Fore 1990:4).


Long, T.G., 2001, Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship, The Alban Institute, NP.


