

CHRISTMAS ON TRIAL

by Greg Thomas



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Christmas on Trial

A mock trial
with audience participation

by GREG THOMAS

This play is dedicated to Louise and Todd Thornton of Palm Coast, Florida, who are shining witnesses of the love and grace that abides in the Nativity.

*Greg Thomas
April 21, 1992*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(In order of appearance)

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARDS

JUDGE

PROSECUTOR*

SHEPHERD

BOY ONE

BOY TWO

STABLE BOY**

MAIDSERVANT

EXTRAS *(Guards and Clerks of the Court)*

* *This role must be played by a female — her identity is revealed at the end.*

** *This role should be played by a boy of about 13 with a good voice. (He sings a short solo.)*

PRODUCTION NOTES

This play is set during the time of Augustus Caesar's reign, about three years after Jesus' birth. It takes place in a court of law in the city of Nicopolis (Emmaus to the Jews), which is located about 15 minutes northwest of Jerusalem. It is a courtroom drama with the judge, prosecutor and all the other requisite players. The prosecutor is trying to prove that the "stories of heavenly beings and wondrous stars . . . are merely traitorous lies." The congregation is the defense, countering the charges by singing appropriate Christmas carols. *Christmas on Trial* is appropriate for performance anytime during the Christmas season.

PROPS

Judge — Five or six scrolls, folded pieces of paper

Prosecutor — Three or four scrolls

Captain of the Guards — Large staff

COSTUMES

Judge — Small, dark skullcap; dark robe with golden chain; large rings; sandals

Prosecutor — Purple robe of fine quality suggesting wealth; jewelry; sandals

Captain of the Guards — Helmet made from plastic gallon milk jug painted bronze with large red feather; lance complete with large spearhead made from six-foot-long dowel painted bronze; off-white tunic; thick leather belt; sandals

Shepherd — Small, dark skullcap; brown tunic suggesting poverty; barefoot

Two Boys — Dark skullcaps; light-brown tunics also suggesting poverty; barefoot

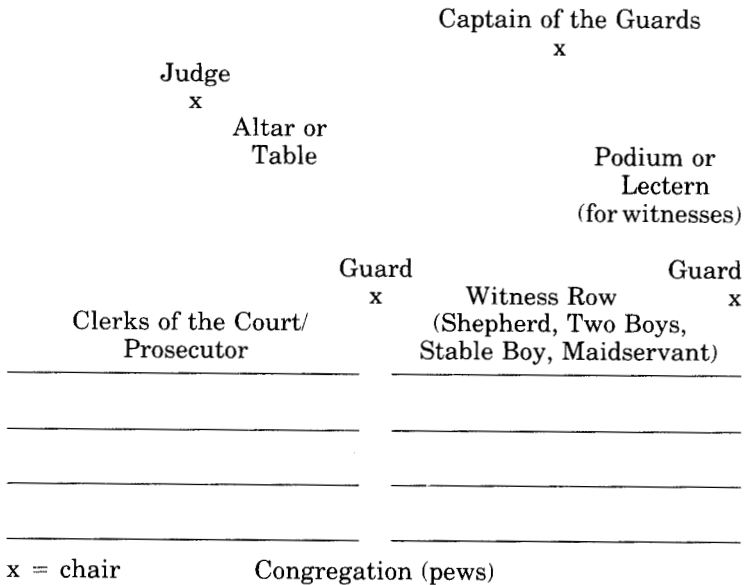
Stable Boy — Cloth headpiece tied with cord (kaffiyeh); off-white tunic of slightly better class than Shepherd; barefoot

Maidservant — Cloth draped over head; robe of green or brown; very little jewelry; barefoot

STAGING

Center Stage is an altar or communion table or regular table. Judge sits in a chair Right of the table. Prosecutor sits on the Front Left row of the audience. Shepherd, Two Boys, Stable Boy and Maidservant all are Off-stage Right as the play opens. The witnesses are escorted to the pulpit or lectern Down Left by the Captain of the Guards as they testify in turn. (Witnesses can bring their testimony with them concealed in a scroll to read at the podium.) The Captain of the Guards stands at attention behind the witness as he/she testifies and, when the testimony is finished, escorts him/her to the Front Right row of the audience ("Witness Row").

STAGING DIAGRAM



SONGS
(In order of appearance)

1. **O Come, O Come, Emmanuel** — Soloist. verse 1: remaining verses, congregation
2. **Angels We Have Heard on High** — Congregation
3. **Away in a Manger** — Congregation, verses 1 and 2; final verse, solo by Stable Boy
4. **We Three Kings of Orient Are** — Congregation
5. **O Holy Night** — Solo or congregation
6. **Joy to the World** — Congregation

For a smooth, uninterrupted performance, a list should be compiled of the carols in the order they are sung with your church's hymnal number beside each one. The list may be handed to the congregation as they arrive or it may be included in your regular church bulletin.

The organist or music director will need a playbook to follow along with so that he/she will be alerted as to when the congregation sings.

(*CLERKS OF THE COURT enter from Left and take their seats on the front pew. They are followed by GUARDS, who position themselves by "Witness Row." The CAPTAIN OF THE GUARDS holds a large staff. He crosses to Down Center and pounds the staff on the ground three times.*)

CAPTAIN: Silence. Silence in the court. Silence. All view Caesar's chief prosecutor. (*PROSECUTOR enters from Left and quickly takes her seat.*) Silence. Silence in the court. Silence. All take note of the blessings of Lord Augustus Caesar's reign, and the reign of Quirinius, Caesar's Governor of Syria, and Archelaus of Judea, Caesar's King of the Jews. Hail Caesar! Hail justice! Hail Caesar! (*He takes his post and remains standing. JUDGE enters Right and takes his place at Up Center chair. He carries assorted papers. He is very confident and assured.*)

JUDGE: My task today is to judge the validity of the events that took place some three years ago in a small town southeast of here called the City of David or Bethlehem. Rome feels the events are fabrications of truth and are being used to cause rebellion and fragmentation in Judea. I shall hear testimony from witnesses of the events in question and then render a decision which will be relayed to Rome. I wish to thank my hosts, the citizens of Emmaus — or is it Nicopolis now? The Romans rename towns so quickly these days. (*PROSECUTOR loudly clears her throat.*) I believe you have already met the prosecutor. (*PROSECUTOR rises and turns to congregation.*) And of course you understand that (*Pointing to congregation*) you are the defense. I shall now hear the prosecutor's opening remarks.

PROSECUTOR: Thank you, your honor. We're here today to strip legend from fact; myth from reality; untruth from truth. I will show that these stories of heavenly beings and wondrous stars and mysterious gifts for a poor carpenter's

1 newborn son who is to be the King of the Jews are merely
2 traitorous lies that seek to spread discord and rebellion
3 in Caesar's beloved Judea. *(She sits.)*

4 **JUDGE:** I shall now hear opening remarks from the defense.

5

6 **SONG:** O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

7 *(Verse 1 is sung a cappella by a SOLOIST; remaining verses are*
8 *sung by the congregation with organ or piano accompaniment.)*

9

10 **JUDGE:** Prosecutor, call your first witness.

11 **PROSECUTOR:** Thank you, your honor. *(To the CAPTAIN)*
12 Bring him out, eh? *(CAPTAIN exits Right and returns with*
13 *SHEPHERD, BOY ONE and BOY TWO. BOYS cross directly*
14 *to Witness Row and sit. CAPTAIN leads SHEPHERD to podium*
15 *Down Left and takes his place.) Your honor, my first witness*
16 *is a man who claims to have seen, (Reads from document)*
17 *quote, "a heavenly host who were singing 'glory to God*
18 *in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill to all,' "* end
19 of quote.

20 **JUDGE:** Very well. Continue.

21 **PROSECUTOR:** State your name, please.

22 **SHEPHERD:** *(Nervously)* My name is Zebedee from the region
23 of Galilee.

24 **PROSECUTOR:** On the night in question, you were a long
25 way from home, weren't you?

26 **SHEPHERD:** Well, uh, yes I was. I came to this region
27 to . . . well you see, my uncle has a flock down there in
28 Bethlehem and I needed the work . . .

29 **PROSECUTOR:** Then you have not been a shepherd long?

30 **SHEPHERD:** No. I grew up in Galilee and came here with my
31 family for the work.

32 **PROSECUTOR:** Very well, then. Let me get straight to the
33 point. Are you a Jew?

34 **SHEPHERD:** Why, yes. I'm a Jew.

35 **PROSECUTOR:** And as a Jew, do you hate Rome, sir?

1 JUDGE: The prosecutor will refrain from bringing politics
2 into the testimony of the witnesses.

3 PROSECUTOR: Your honor, I am trying to show the
4 underlying agenda of the testimony.

5 JUDGE: I am interested in the events and the truth of the
6 events and *not* in underlying political agendas. Continue.

7 PROSECUTOR: Now Zebedee, if you would, tell us in your
8 own words what happened that night.

9 SHEPHERD: Well, I had been with the flock all day. It was
10 nighttime. Five or six of my companions and I had finished
11 dinner and we were watching our sheep.

12 PROSECUTOR: Your honor, I want to make you aware of the
13 fact that this shepherd's other companions could not be
14 found to testify today. Zebedee here was informed of his
15 civic duty and was persuaded to appear before you . . .

16 SHEPHERD: Persuaded? You took my wife to prison and said
17 if I didn't testify, she would stay there forever.

18 PROSECUTOR: Just tell us what you were witness to that
19 night.

20 SHEPHERD: Well, as I said, I was sitting there watching the
21 sheep, talking of family and things, then suddenly there
22 was daylight. Not a dawning, but more like the high noon
23 sun had suddenly lit up the night sky. And I saw a person
24 there. No. Many people. They were all in white. A bright
25 white. If my wife cleaned for a thousand years, she couldn't
26 get my clothes so white. One of those beings told me that
27 I shouldn't be afraid, but I was. I was cowering on the
28 ground. Then I heard them say "Glory to God in the
29 highest, and on earth peace, goodwill to all." They told us
30 that born to us in the City of David was a child who was
31 the Messiah, the Lord, and we would find the child lying
32 in a manger. And then there were another couple of
33 "glorias" and then they were gone. It was nighttime again.
34 The sheep hadn't noticed a thing, but I expect that from
35 sheep . . . dumbest creatures on the face of the . . .

- 1 PROSECUTOR: Did you have any wine with dinner that
2 night?
- 3 SHEPHERD: Only a fool would drink water out in the fields.
4 All sorts of diseases from the water out there.
- 5 PROSECUTOR: I see. Is it possible that you were perhaps
6 intoxicated?
- 7 SHEPHERD: I can assure you I wasn't. I could never have
8 imagined night turning into day or a whole sky full of
9 angels.
- 10 PROSECUTOR: What did you and your companions do after
11 these figures had vanished?
- 12 SHEPHERD: Well, we decided to go to Bethlehem to see what
13 was going on. We figured that any baby whose birth caused
14 night to turn into day was definitely worth visiting, so we
15 left the flock and went to Bethlehem. There we found a
16 stable behind an inn. Inside was a young woman and an
17 older man. In the trough was some hay and nestled inside
18 was a baby, fast asleep. What a sight! The young woman
19 and the older man didn't seem surprised to see us. It was
20 as if they had been expecting us.
- 21 PROSECUTOR: You saw no one else?
- 22 SHEPHERD: No one else. There wasn't even a lamb in sight.
23 Aye, when we got back to our flock it was nearly daybreak.
24 The stupid sheep hadn't moved a bit. But we found out
25 that 12 of them had been killed by wolves.
- 26 PROSECUTOR: Your honor, I would like to make you aware
27 of the fact that the following day 12 sheep had indeed been
28 killed and Zebedee was immediately relieved of his
29 employment.
- 30 SHEPHERD: My uncle was not very pleased that he lost 12
31 sheep because I was off looking at some baby. I was fired
32 and along with my family returned to Galilee that
33 afternoon; and a good thing we did, too, because my
34 youngest son was 18 months old at that time, and King
35 Herod had just ruled that all Bethlehem's male babies aged

1 two and under be killed. When we returned, I took up
 2 fishing. I figured fish can't be any more stupid than sheep.
 3 My sons, when they get older, will help out in the business.
 4 They're here with me now. Boys, come on up and say hello
 5 to the judge. Come on. Come on. (*BOYS ONE and TWO dash*
 6 *forward to SHEPHERD.*)

7 **BOY ONE:** Hah. Got here first. I won.

8 **BOY TWO:** You cheated. Daddy, tell him he cheated.

9 **BOY ONE:** Did not.

10 **BOY TWO:** Did too.

11 **BOY ONE:** Did not.

12 **BOY TWO:** Did too!

13 **SHEPHERD:** Boys! Boys! Please. Say hello to the nice judge.

14 Your honor, these are my sons — James . . .

15 **BOY ONE:** Greetings, sir. (*He bows.*)

16 **SHEPHERD:** And John.

17 **BOY TWO:** Yo, judge.

18 **BOY ONE:** Don't be so stupid in front of everybody.

19 **BOY TWO:** I'm not stupid!

20 **BOY ONE:** Are too.

21 **BOY TWO:** Am not.

22 **BOY ONE:** Are too.

23 **BOY TWO:** Am not.

24 **JUDGE:** Do they argue like that all the time?

25 **SHEPHERD:** My neighbors call our home the "House of
 26 Thunder" because of all the shouting.

27 **JUDGE:** (*To the CAPTAIN*) Release his wife. (*CAPTAIN exits*
 28 *Right.*)

29 **BOY TWO:** Dad, let's go.

30 **PROSECUTOR:** (*Points to congregation.*) Your witness!

31

32 **SONG:** *Angels We Have Heard on High*

33 (*Congregation stands and sings with organ or piano*
 34 *accompaniment.*)

35

1 *(After the hymn, SHEPHERD, BOY ONE and BOY TWO are*
 2 *seated on Witness Row. CAPTAIN has returned to his post.)*

3 **PROSECUTOR:** Your honor, my next witness was actually
 4 present at the birth of the baby that Zebedee mentioned.

5 **JUDGE:** Very well.

6 **PROSECUTOR:** *(To CAPTAIN)* Go ahead and bring him in.
 7 *(CAPTAIN exits Right and returns with STABLE BOY. They*
 8 *cross to Down Left podium, which is a bit too high for the BOY.*
 9 *CAPTAIN hastily brings a chair for the BOY to stand on, but*
 10 *it is too high.)* Never mind, guard. Let the boy stand in front
 11 of the witness stand. *(CAPTAIN returns to his post. STABLE*
 12 *BOY is very intelligent and gentle — the “All-Judean kid.”)*

13 **PROSECUTOR:** Don’t be nervous, boy.

14 **STABLE BOY:** I won’t be if you won’t be.

15 **PROSECUTOR:** Please tell the judge your name.

16 **STABLE BOY:** Your honor, my name is Lukanus. I am the
 17 stable boy at Norwood’s Inn in the City of David. I have
 18 lived there almost all my life. My mother is a midwife for
 19 both Jews and Gentiles. My father is an historian currently
 20 working in Alexandria. I have no brothers or sisters. I
 21 stand five feet, three inches tall and . . .

22 **PROSECUTOR:** Very well done, Lukanus. That’s quite
 23 enough.

24 **STABLE BOY:** I’m known for detail.

25 **PROSECUTOR:** Yes. Could you tell us in limited detail, if you
 26 don’t mind, what you saw on the night in question?

27 **STABLE BOY:** It was toward the end of the Roman month of
 28 December. My mother hadn’t yet returned from the hill
 29 country where she delivered a son to the old priest
 30 Zechariah.

31 **PROSECUTOR:** Your honor, I would like to make you aware
 32 of the fact that indeed the boy’s mother was the midwife
 33 for Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah and cousin of the
 34 young girl in question. Elizabeth’s son is John. They are
 35 residents of the hill country and were unavailable to

1 testify.

2 **STABLE BOY:** On the night in question, counselor, I was
3 about to finish cleaning the stables when Mr. Norwood,
4 owner of the best inn on the east side of Bethlehem,
5 ushered in a girl named Mary and a carpenter named
6 Joseph. Mr. Norwood asked me to fetch my mom because
7 Mary was about to deliver. When I told him Mom was still
8 up in the hill country, he quickly blurted out something
9 like I was the son of a midwife and I would have to do.
10 Then he left. Joseph and I had Mary lay down. I put some
11 hay in a trough and ... (*Very shyly*) And you know ... the
12 baby was born.

13 **JUDGE:** Yes. Don't be shy now, boy.

14 **STABLE BOY:** I'm only thirteen.

15 **PROSECUTOR:** After the baby was born?

16 **STABLE BOY:** Well, Joseph and Mary cried some and the
17 baby acted like any other baby. Joseph asked me if I had
18 a piece of cloth to wrap up his new son. I couldn't find
19 anything so I gave him my kaffiyeh.* (*Touches headpiece.*)
20 He wrapped up the baby and laid him in the trough I had
21 prepared.

22 **PROSECUTOR:** Then? What happened then?

23 **STABLE BOY:** Nothing really. There was complete quiet.
24 Complete peace. It's hard to explain. I ran home and told
25 my mom everything.

26 **PROSECUTOR:** You saw no one else?

27 **STABLE BOY:** Just the baby and his parents.

28 **JUDGE:** Lukanus ...

29 **STABLE BOY:** Your honor, my friends call me Luke.

30 **JUDGE:** Luke, you seem to be a very bright young man. What
31 are your career plans?

32 **STABLE BOY:** I plan to study medicine in Alexandria. I hope
33 to return here someday as a doctor. I hope that I can

34

35 * (ká fi yah)

1 someday make a difference in someone's life.

2 **PROSECUTOR:** Thank you very much. *(To congregation)* Your
3 witness.

4

5 **SONG:** *Away in a Manger*

6 *(Should be accompanied by guitar. Congregation sings all verses*
7 *except for the final verse. STABLE BOY sings the final verse as*
8 *a solo.)*

9

10 *(After the hymn, STABLE BOY crosses to Witness Row and sits.)*

11 **PROSECUTOR:** Your honor, I call on a maidservant that was
12 with the caravan of foreign dignitaries that visited the
13 area shortly after the child was born. *(CAPTAIN exits and*
14 *returns with MAIDSERVANT from Right. He escorts her to*
15 *podium Left and returns to his post.)* Would you please tell
16 us your name?

17 **MAIDSERVANT:** I am Martha of Bethany. I am a
18 maidservant.

19 **PROSECUTOR:** And you were hired some three years ago
20 for those services by a foreign . . .

21 **MAIDSERVANT:** King. He entered our house and asked my
22 brother, Lazarus, which of his sisters could be spared.
23 Lazarus chose me over my sister, Mary, and off I went. I
24 traveled with them for almost three months. They were
25 very kindly and good to me. The only odd thing about
26 them was that they would only travel at night.

27 **PROSECUTOR:** Why only at night?

28 **MAIDSERVANT:** They were following the star.

29 **PROSECUTOR:** Your honor, I would like to make you aware
30 of the fact that there was indeed a rare astrological
31 occurrence at that time. It had Persian astrologers
32 predicting the birth of a new king. Go on please, Martha.

33 **MAIDSERVANT:** Night after night they followed that star.
34 When they came to Jerusalem, they were received by King
35 Herod who asked to be told where he might find this new

1 king. My masters were wise, as I have mentioned. They
2 told King Herod that they weren't sure exactly where the
3 new king was, but that they would let King Herod know
4 on their way back.

5 PROSECUTOR: Your honor, this has all been well-
6 documented in the late king's official court transcripts.

7 JUDGE: (*Holding a mound of papers*) Yes. Yes. I have them here.
8 Continue, please.

9 MAIDSERVANT: Well, we followed the star to the City of
10 David and found a young woman, an older man and a
11 newborn boy in a small house on the outskirts of town.
12 The young woman and man did not seem at all surprised
13 by our presence. Then the one who hired me requested
14 that I bring him his personal chest. The other kings
15 presented the child with gifts of gold and frankincense. I
16 presented my master with his chest. He pulled out a small
17 vial of ointment. By the smell of it, I knew immediately
18 what it was.

19 PROSECUTOR: And what was it?

20 MAIDSERVANT: Myrrh.

21 PROSECUTOR: The burial ointment? A strange gift for a
22 newborn.

23 MAIDSERVANT: Yes. Very unusual.

24 PROSECUTOR: What happened on your caravan's return
25 journey?

26 MAIDSERVANT: Well, first of all, we didn't travel only at
27 night anymore. I thought we were going straight for
28 Jerusalem, but then my masters decided to take another
29 route away from Jerusalem. Before I knew it, I was back
30 home with Lazarus and Mary.

31 PROSECUTOR: Your honor, King Herod's transcripts show
32 that upon learning he had been tricked by the so-called
33 wise men of Persia, Herod ordered that all children under
34 the age of two be terminated.

35 JUDGE: Yes, I have that paper, as well as the official death



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