

Cast in Order of Appearance and Brief Synopsis

Joseph	<i>Baritone</i>
Aaron, husband of Naomi	<i>Tenor</i>
Mary	<i>Soprano</i>
Naomi, cousin of Mary	<i>Mezzo-soprano</i>
The Angel of the Lord	<i>Soprano</i>
Cornelius, a Roman centurion	<i>Tenor</i>
Marcus, a Roman legionary	<i>Baritone</i>
Seeress	<i>Contralto</i>
First acolyte	<i>Soprano (or boy treble)</i>
Second acolyte	<i>Mezzo-soprano</i>
Quintus, a Roman magistrate	<i>Bass</i>

SATB chorus of Nazarene villagers (scene 1); angels (SA) and shepherds (TB) (scene 2)

SATB quartet (or semi-chorus) of narrators

Optional SA children's chorus of Bethlehemite children

Non-singing roles: dancers (scene 1); Roman soldiers (scene 2)

Scene 1. Joseph's friend Aaron informs him that it is time for him to meet Mary, who is to be his betrothed. Aaron tells of the new world that awaits him in the married state, but Joseph wonders what he has to offer as a husband: who would want to marry this poor carpenter? The villagers of Nazareth turn out for the occasion and listen as Mary pledges her troth to Joseph; they sing a celebratory chorus and stage a joyous dance. Mary and her cousin Naomi, who is Aaron's wife, depart to visit their relatives, while Joseph and Aaron adjourn to share a bottle of wine. The narrators enter to reveal that Mary will be visited that evening by an angel who informs her that she will bear a Son who will be holy. Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is unexpectedly with child, and does not return for three months. On the day of her return, Joseph remembers the moments at their betrothal pledges when they held hands and shared a dream of a future together. She enters with Aaron and Naomi but shortly asks them to leave so that she can tell Joseph that she is with child by the Holy Spirit, and assures him that she will not blame him if he wishes that they should now part. Joseph is taken aback and asks time to consider what should be done. At the end of the day, the narrators reveal, he has decided he is not worthy of such a child and that we will quietly release Mary from her troth. But that night an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and assures him that the Child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and that he must be like a father to this child. In the morning Joseph remembers and ponders the dream, wondering what he can give such a child. When Mary returns for his decision, he pledges his love for the Child and his desire to wed and take the Child into their home. Mary responds joyously, and they are joined first by Naomi and Aaron and then by the whole village who celebrate their acceptance of this Holy Gift.

Scene 2. At dusk outside the gates of Bethlehem, Marcus informs Cornelius that the magistrate should be returning soon from a disastrous visit to his daughter, who has died in childbirth. A seeress and two acolytes enter; she offers to reveal the future but warns that all of the portents are dark and that many fear that the world may be facing its doom. Cornelius requests a fortune in spite of her warning; she casts bones and looks at him with alarm: "You shall look upon the face of all that is holy!" Mary, Naomi, Aaron, and Joseph enter and express relief that they have finally reached Bethlehem. Mary is greeted with a blessing from the seeress and her acolytes. The magistrate enters with heavy tread and Mary greets him with the wish that he will find relief from his obvious grief. When the magistrate rebukes Joseph for bringing his wife to the census in her condition, Joseph acknowledges his mistake but explains that he wanted to attend the birth of the Holy Child. The magistrate responds that every child is holy and innocent, and then asks Cornelius to see that Mary is taken to a place where she may give birth safely, a gesture prompted by the memory of his own recent loss. After the magistrate's departure, when Joseph tries to join the others, Cornelius stops him: "The magistrate said nothing about you." Mary, Naomi, and Aaron depart with Marcus; when Joseph asks to accompany them, Cornelius boasts of the Roman Empire's power and indifference to his desires. Joseph responds by stating that he is a servant of the One True God, the Lord Most High. As night falls, Cornelius feels himself struggling to breathe and wonders if the seeress's prophecy of doom is coming to pass. Joseph prays to the Lord that their lives might be dedicated to God. Cornelius orders the city gates closed, and the narrators enter to describe the transformation of the night as the Child is born, light fills the skies, and angels and shepherds sing of the glory of God. When the shepherds demand entry to the city to worship the child, Cornelius opens the gates. After Aaron bursts forth and greets Joseph, Cornelius is moved: "Surely this Child is the Son of the Lord Most High!" He joins Joseph, Aaron, and the shepherds in praising God for the gift of his Son. They all enter the city; the narrators conclude with a brief epilogue.