

a beatbybeat play

# The **MYSTERIOUS** Animal



A New Nativity Play

by  
Gwynne Watkins

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# The Mysterious Animal

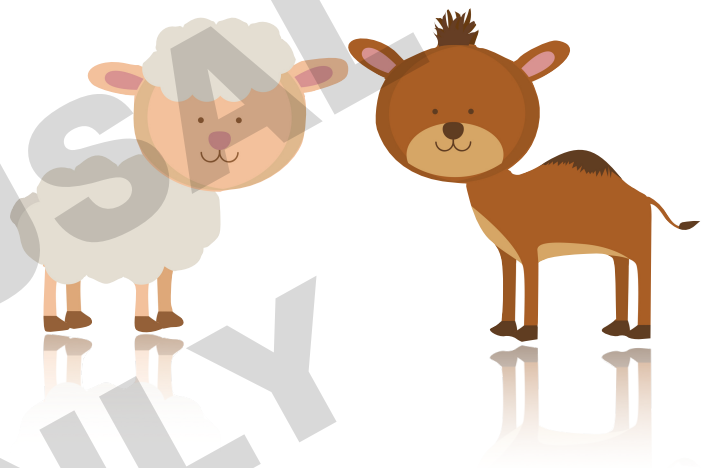
## CAST

Camel  
Cow  
Sheep  
Donkey  
Dove

Innkeeper  
Guest

Shepherd  
Lamb

Mary  
Joseph



## SET

A manger with a sleeping baby inside.

Optional set decorations could include:

- hay bails
- a backdrop of a dark, starry night



## **THE MYSTERIOUS ANIMAL: A NEW NATIVITY PLAY**

By Gwynne Watkins

*(Lights up on the Barn. CAMEL is speaking to SHEEP and COW while they eat hay. DONKEY is sleeping. The manger containing THE BABY is onstage, perhaps blocked by the animals. None are paying attention to it.)*

**CAMEL**

And in Babylon, camels like me eat grapes straight from the vine. Not this dry, awful hay. Do you really have this for every meal?

**COW**

Of course! Hay is amoozing!

**CAMEL**

Animals without humps have no taste.

**SHEEP**

Tell us more about the city of Baaaa-bylon.

**CAMEL**

It's so beautiful that words fail me. Not like this dump. Where am I again?

**SHEEP**

Baaa - ethlehem.

**CAMEL**

Why my master brought us to this inn in the middle of nowhere, I have no idea. You know he's a very important man.

**COW**

Well, we've heard all about Camel. How about you Donkey? Where are you from? Donkey?

*(Donkey wakes up suddenly.)*

**DONKEY**

Huh? Sorry, I'm so tired. My mistress rode me here all the way from Nazareth.

**CAMEL**

Ugh, can anything good come from Nazareth?

**SHEEP**

What about the new animal?



**CAMEL**

What new animal?

**COW**

The mysterious animal that arrived after donkey and before you.

**SHEEP**

It's there, in the manger.

*(The animals step out of the way of the manger and gather around it. There is a baby inside it.)*

**CAMEL**

Oh I know what THAT is. I see them in the palace gardens all the time! That is a baby.

**DONKEY**

My master and mistress kept talking about a baby! When the baby would come, what to name the baby. This must be it.

**COW**

But why is it here?

*(The DOVE flies into the barn.)*

**DOVE**

Innkeeper! Coo! Coo! Innkeeper!

*(The animals scatter and go back to sleeping or eating hay. The INNKEEPER enters with a GUEST.)*

**INNKEEPER**

So here's the barn.

**GUEST**

Is that a baby?

**INNKEEPER**

So, crazy story. This young couple, Mary and Joseph, comes to the door in the middle of the night, asks for a room. I tell them, sorry, we're booked up! I got you here, that guy from Babylon coming in. Then Joseph says, but my wife is having a baby. So I go, look, you can stay in the barn, that's the best I can do. I didn't realize she was having the baby *tonight*.

**GUEST**

Cute little guy.

**INNKEEPER**

Yeah, they're letting him sleep in here while I get them some dinner. Least I could do for a couple of peasants. Anyway, you can keep your horses here. I'll help you bring them in.

*(Innkeeper and guest leave.)*

**CAMEL**

Did you hear that? Peasants! No wonder they're staying in a filthy barn.

**COW**

I like this barn. It's noisy and smells like feet.

**DONKEY**

Do not insult my master and mistress, Camel.

**CAMEL**

I'm sorry, I cannot respect people who ride donkeys and sleep in barns.

**DONKEY**

They are good people, and this baby is special.

**SHEEP**

How is it special?

**DOVE**

Innkeeper! Coo! Coo! Innkeeper!

*(Animals resume their animal duties. INNKEEPER ENTERS WITH SHEPHERD and his LAMB.)*

**INNKEEPER**

Here's the barn. Why'd you want to see it?

**SHEPHERD**

So, crazy story. I was in that field over there, like usual, keeping watch over my flock by night.

**LAMB**

Baaaa.

**SHEEP (in greeting)**

Baaaa.

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**SHEPHERD**

Then, out of nowhere, an angel appears, and says, "Good news! A savior has been born in Bethlehem. Look for the baby who's lying in a manger." So I thought manger... barn... the inn has a barn... and there he is! The Messiah!

**LAMB**

Baaa!

*(The shepherd bows down to the baby and the lamb follows suit. After a moment, they stand.)*

**SHEPHERD**

Thank you for letting me see him. This is the greatest day of my life, but I must return to my flock.

**INNKEEPER (confused)**

An angel, you say?

**SHEPHERD**

Not just one! A whole multitude of angels, singing "Glory to God in the highest!"

*(The Shepherd exits with the confused Innkeeper.)*

**DONKEY**

Told you he was special.

**CAMEL**

An angel? Who believes that nonsense?

**SHEEP**

What brought you here again?

**CAMEL**

My master is a scientist and a scholar. We followed a star.

**COW**

An angel, a star - sounds like there were a lot of things pointing people to this barn.

**DONKEY**

He's the Messiah. The shepherd called this baby the Messiah.

**CAMEL**

Oh no no no. I know about the Messiah. The Messiah is the warrior whom God will send to save the world. He will be a great king with a white horse and a golden sword.

**SHEEP**

So not a baby then?

**CAMEL**

The Messiah will be the most important person who ever lived. He will not be born in a barn like an animal.

**DONKEY**

Is there a plank in your eye or something? You are an animal!

**DOVE**

Coo! Coo! Coo!

*(Animals scatter. Mary and Joseph walk in and go to the baby.)*

**JOSEPH**

Do you feel better now that you've eaten?

**MARY**

Yes, my strength is returning. And our son is sleeping peacefully.

**JOSEPH**

None of this has happened the way I thought it would.

**MARY**

No, but God has a plan.

**JOSEPH**

What if we're doing everything wrong? How can Jesus save our people when he began his life in a barn?

**MARY**

How can a donkey carry a great weight for miles? How can a sheep give wool year after year? Animals are born in barns, and they do the work of the world. Our son will do God's work.

*(Innkeeper enters.)*

**INNKEEPER**

So, crazy story. There's a king here who followed a star and he wants to see the baby?

**JOSEPH**

That doesn't sound crazy at all.

*(Mary picks up the baby. She and Joseph exit with the innkeeper.)*



**CAMEL**

My master traveled all this way to see the baby? THAT baby?

**COW**

He's not just a baby. He's the Messiah.

**CAMEL**

Impossible!! What kind of Messiah is born in a barn to peasants?

**DONKEY**

A Messiah who doesn't need a white horse and a golden sword to lead his people. A Messiah who will ride on a donkey.

**SHEEP**

A Messiah who will take care of all of us, big and small alike. Like a good shepherd.

**COW**

A Messiah who wants to show us that peasants and kings aren't so different. Or camels and cows.

**CAMEL**

And to think... I got to see him first!

*(Mary comes forward, holding the baby. She speaks to the audience.)*

**MARY**

This child was born to give his people  
the knowledge of salvation  
Through the forgiveness of their sins,  
Because of the tender mercy of our God,  
By which the rising sun will come to us from heaven,  
To shine on those living in darkness  
And in the shadow of death,  
To guide our feet into the path of peace.  
May it be so.

*(The cast, animals and humans, come forward to sing "The First Noel.")*

**SONG: THE FIRST NOEL (Traditional, Verses 1-4 and 6)**

The First Noel the angel did say  
Was to certain poor shepherds  
in fields as they lay;  
In fields as they lay, keeping their sheep,  
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.

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Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,  
Born is the King of Israel.

They looked up and saw a star  
Shining in the east beyond them far,  
And to the earth it gave great light,  
And so it continued both day and night.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,  
Born is the King of Israel.

And by the light of that same star  
Three wise men came from country far;  
To seek for a king was their intent,  
And to follow the star wherever it went.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,  
Born is the King of Israel.

This star drew nigh to the northwest,  
O'er Bethlehem it took its rest,  
And there it did both stop and stay  
Right over the place where Jesus lay.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,  
Born is the King of Israel.

Then let us all with one accord  
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord;  
That hath made heaven and earth of naught,  
And with his blood mankind hath bought

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,  
Born is the King of Israel.

*END*

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## NOTES AND STUDY GUIDE FOR *The Mysterious Animal*

Though the Bible tells us that newborn baby Jesus slept in a manger, or feeding trough (Luke 2:7), there is no specific mention in the Gospels of animals being present at his birth. The tradition of including animals in the Nativity scene comes from St. Francis of Assisi, who created the first “living” tableau of Christ’s birth in the 13th century, including an ox and ass – that is, a male cow and a male donkey. (An ox and ass are also mentioned in the 7th century apocryphal book the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, which may have inspired Francis.)

Animals were a daily part of life in ancient Israel, and Jesus did speak of them frequently. The animals in the Nativity scene serve to remind us that Jesus was born in poverty, and preached of salvation for all – not just the righteous, but the humble, oppressed, and outcast. Their presence also serves to foreshadow Jesus’ life and teachings – for example, his ride on a donkey into Jerusalem (Matthew 21), and the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25).

‘The Mysterious Animal’ is a funny play with a sincere message: The creatures who share the barn with baby Jesus are among the first to receive and understand the Good News of the gospels, along with the shepherds, the magi, and Mary and Joseph. Here, a guide to the scriptures and traditions that are referenced by the characters.



## THE MEANING OF THE ANIMALS

All of the animals in this play are significant in the Bible. To generate a complete list of the Bible verses in which each appears, search for the animal names individually in a Biblical index, such as the website Biblegateway.com.

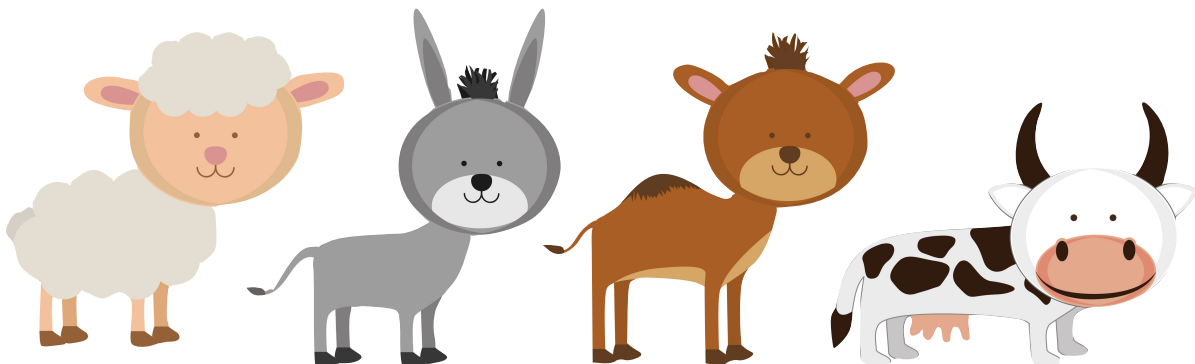
**DONKEY:** The Gospels do not say whether Mary and Joseph took a donkey on their journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. In the apocryphal book The Protoevangelium of James, Mary rides a donkey, which means that the tradition dates back to the second century or earlier. Jesus also rides through Jerusalem on a donkey in the days before his crucifixion (Matthew 21), a procession that is traditionally celebrated on Palm Sunday.

**DOVE:** Doves appear in the Gospels as a symbol of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16).

**COW:** Cows are one of the beasts specified in the creation story of Genesis (Genesis 1:24) and appear as symbols of prosperity and famine in the dreams that Jacob interprets for Pharaoh (Genesis 41:26)

**SHEEP:** Sheep are a powerful symbol in the Bible of God's compassion for humanity. Examples include Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd...") and the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:2-7).

**CAMEL:** Camels were the ultimate form of ancient desert transportation. In Mark 10:25, Jesus tells his disciples, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."



## **SCRIPTURE REFERENCES IN THE PLAY**

“Can anything good come from Nazareth?” - John 1:46

“You can stay in the barn” - Luke 2 says that Jesus was placed in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn (or guest room, depending on translation).

The shepherd’s story appears in Luke 2:8-20.

The kings (or wise men, or magi) appear in Matthew 2. The Gospels state that the kings visited Jesus at his house sometime after the birth, and does not specify how many they were or which countries they were from – but by tradition dating back to the Medieval ages, one of the kings was from Babylon. Nativity scenes traditionally have the magi worshipping at the manger alongside the shepherds.

The word Messiah, from the Hebrew word meaning “anointed” or “chosen one,” is used to describe Jesus in all four Gospels. Many ancient Jews believed that the savior of their people would be a warrior and a king, like Jesus’ ancestor David.

“Is there a plank in your eye?” - Matthew 7:3

“A messiah who will ride on a donkey” - Matthew 21

“Like a good shepherd” - John 10:11

“Peasants and kings” is a reference to the words of Paul in Galatians 3:28.

“Camels and cows” - Isaiah 11:6 prophesies that the Messiah will bring about a kingdom where animals who are natural enemies will live peacefully side by side.

In Luke 2:19, Mary is said to treasure the miraculous events of her son’s birth and “ponder them in her heart.” Mary’s final speech in this play is adapted from the song of Zechariah (Luke 1:77-29). In these verses, Zechariah sings praises to God following the birth of his son, John the Baptist, the prophet who prepares the way for Jesus. These beautiful words anticipate Jesus’ message of peace and salvation for all.





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