

THE BETHLEHEM EXPERIENCE

by Rhonda Wray



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INTRODUCTION

(Scene 1)

(GUARD and BEGGAR should be nearby, ready to make their entrances.)

TOUR GUIDE: Welcome to Bethlehem, the City of David. My name is Hannah/Benjamin and I have been sent by the town council to assist travelers, such as you folks, who have come for the census. (*Peering closely*) You seem a bit weary from your journeys, and who can blame you, after walking many days to get here. But you know the law — the census is required to account for everyone in your household and all your property to determine how much tax you have to pay. It seems our emperor Caesar has decided that armies take a lot of money, so he's imposing very strict taxes this census. After we all take care of our census and tax obligations, I'd like to show you around the marketplace of our small village. It's the heart of Bethlehem. All our merchants both live and work there. We carry on our business, but we always find time to visit about what is happening in our little village. Our small village is extra crowded these days because of this census, so please stay close to me in a group. This not only makes it easier for you to see and hear everything, but it will also ensure your safety — we've heard reports of purse snatchers roaming these streets. There have been rumors of runaway slaves attaching themselves to groups of visitors. And we have our share of beggars. I'm sure you know by now how I feel about those oppressive Romans, but nevertheless, we mustn't cause trouble. You'll see Roman guards stationed in the marketplace. Stop when they say stop, and go if they tell you to hurry, because they tend to be a bit rough and you don't want to get on their bad side! Why don't you wait right here by the city gate and I'll go see if the Census Taker is ready

1 **for us.** (*TOUR GUIDE exits through city gate. Immediately a*
2 *conniving, poorly dressed BEGGAR approaches the GROUP.*)

3 **BEGGAR:** Psst! You folks just get here? Have I got a deal for
4 you! I'll bet you wouldn't mind saving some tax dinarii,
5 would you? (*Without giving them time to respond*) I'll show
6 you a short cut into the village so you can avoid the tax
7 collector. What do you say? Of course, my services aren't
8 free . . . (*Goes around holding out his pouch*) I know you
9 haven't been to the Money Changer yet, but I will take
10 any type of coin . . .

11 **GUARD:** Halt! You scoundrel! (*GUARDS run him out of the area,*
12 *then return.*) Trying to help you evade your taxes, was
13 he/she? Well, there are no short cuts when you're dealing
14 with us Romans! I will *personally* escort you through the
15 city gate right to the Census Taker's table! (*GROUP follows*
16 *guard to the CENSUS TAKER through the city gate.*)

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CENSUS TAKER

(Scene 2)

(*CENSUS TAKER should be seated at a small table outside the city gate. [Could be in an adjoining room.] He/she should have small pieces of parchment and some type of primitive writing instruments, such as reed pens or pencils with feathers taped to the front, for the GROUP to write on when they complete their "census forms" with household information.*)

TOUR GUIDE: (*Recognizes GROUP as they are herded through the city gates by a ROMAN GUARD.*) **What happened to you all?**

GUARD: **I caught them trying to sneak into the city without being registered in the census!**

TOUR GUIDE: **I'm sorry, sir. They must have lost their way. I'll look after them from here.**

GUARD: **Well, you'd better keep a close eye on them because we'll be watching you.**

TOUR GUIDE: (*Under his breath*) **No escaping that, is there? (To GROUP) This way, friends. (Chiding) And don't get sidetracked by any more young ruffians!**

CENSUS TAKER: (*As the GROUP approaches the census tables*) **Line up! Single file! (TOUR GUIDE should be at the head of the line. GUARDS put anyone out of line into place.) Come on, come on, we haven't got all day. (Passes out pieces of parchment and a writing utensil to one person representing each family.) As you complete your papers, be sure that you have listed all the members of your household, including slaves and freed men. And don't forget to take inventory of all your animals.**

TOUR GUIDE: (*Completes his paper and show the others as an example. All family members should be listed as well as any pets.*) **Here are my papers. I believe they are complete.**

CENSUS TAKER: (*Looking at papers*) **Ah, ten camels and four sons — this will bring in a healthy tribute, but tell me —**

1 **have you no sons of military age? The emperor is looking**
 2 **for soldiers as well as taxes.**

3 **TOUR GUIDE:** *(Loudly)* My sons are not old enough to be
 4 **soldiers. *(Muttering)* And I would not have them serve**
 5 **Caesar if they were!**

6 **GUARD:** *(Roughly)* Watch it! *(To CENSUS TAKER)* Plotius, can
 7 **you believe these people? They look down on mighty**
 8 **Jupiter, the supreme god of the Romans, while they**
 9 **worship their Yahweh. They say he is the Living God of**
 10 **the whole universe, but he's invisible!**

11 **CENSUS TAKER:** *(Scornfully)* If that's not enough nonsense,
 12 **they claim that their Yahweh is sending a "Messiah" to**
 13 **deliver them from us Romans.**

14 **GUARD:** As if some invisible God could overthrow our
 15 **mighty armies.**

16 **CENSUS:** Impossible. *(To GROUP)* Next! *(TOUR GUIDE*
 17 *motions next person with paper up. Hopefully they will have*
 18 *listed family members and any pets. The CENSUS TAKER*
 19 *should make brief, off-the-cuff comments — e.g. "Are your*
 20 *daughters of marrying age?" "Ah, boys — future soldiers." "A*
 21 *dog? But that is of no worth to the emperor," etc. If time is short,*
 22 *they may just briefly nod and say "Very good," or sigh, or some*
 23 *such gesture. After all papers are collected)* **I will pass this**
 24 **information on to the Tax Collector. *(Curtly)* That's all I**
 25 **need; go your way. Next!**

26 **GUARD:** *(As TOUR GUIDE leads the group away)* **Remember —**
 27 **we're watching you!**

28 **TOUR GUIDE:** As you can see, the Romans have little time for us
 29 **or our beliefs. We've grown accustomed to it — but it still**
 30 **creates tension. But we have more important things to do**
 31 **than discuss the Romans. Get out your bills and coins — the**
 32 **Money Changer's table is up ahead. *(TOUR GUIDE leads***
 33 ***GROUP to the MONEY CHANGER's table. After GROUP departs,***
 34 ***CENSUS TAKER takes parchment with information to the TAX***
 35 ***COLLECTOR — he will use it to figure each household's taxes.)***

MONEY CHANGER

(Scene 3)

(The MONEY CHANGER should be seated at a small table just outside the city gate. [Could be in an adjoining room.] A ROMAN GUARD is stationed nearby. The following chart of biblical money and its American dollar equivalent should be posted on the front of the table:

1 Penny — 1 Kolbon

1 Nickel — 1 Lepta

1 Dime — ½ Shekel

1 Quarter — Shekel

3 Dollars — Dinarius [Gold coin].

(The MONEY CHANGER will collect the admission fee, but the only money that will actually be “changed” will be three dollars [or amount of your choosing] in exchange for a dinarius — a gold foil-wrapped chocolate coin. This is a very pious donation for the freewill offering at the TAX COLLECTOR’s table, or guests may keep the coin. Otherwise regular coins will be used to purchase items according to the table above. The MONEY CHANGER should have a money box to collect for the admission fee and a small container labeled “kolbons” (one penny equals one kolbon). Everyone will need to put a penny in the kolbon box for the service of having money changed. PICKPOCKET is situated nearby, ready to snatch the TOUR GUIDE’s pouch.)

TOUR GUIDE: Since you come from many different areas of Palestine, we need to get your foreign money changed into our native currency so you may pay your taxes and buy goods in our marketplace. *(Lowers voice.)* Unfortunately, the exchange rates have not been standardized, because this gives the Romans one more opportunity to cheat us. I am sorry, my friends, but what can I do? I take the loss, too. *(Looks at someone’s coins or bills.)* May I take a look at your money? Very interesting. Quite different than our dinarii.

1 **MONEY CHANGER:** Remember, folks, it costs a kolbon to
 2 get your money changed. (*Taps kolbon container.*) The
 3 exchange rate is one dinarius for three dollars.

4 **TOUR GUIDE:** (*To MONEY CHANGER*) That's ridiculous! The
 5 last time I was here, I got a dinarius for only *one* dollar!

6 **MONEY CHANGER:** I know, I know, but with trade as it is,
 7 I must make a living too. I tell you what . . . if you have
 8 silver drachmas to change, I'll give you a better rate.
 9 (*MONEY CHANGER makes his sales pitch for the gold dinarius*
 10 *coin.*) Remember, folks, you are going to be making your
 11 freewill offering at the next stop on your way. Everyone
 12 will be watching . . . Do you want to be admired? When
 13 you drop this dinarius (*Holds up gold coin*) into the
 14 container, everyone will see that you are very pious. Or
 15 do you want to be heckled when you drop this little bitty
 16 kolbon (*Holds up penny*) in? The choice is yours, my friends,
 17 but if I were you . . . (*Proceeds to ad-lib about the gold coins,*
 18 *exchange rates, etc. as anyone who wishes to purchases a gold*
 19 *coin(s). Suddenly, a young PICKPOCKET runs up to TOUR*
 20 *GUIDE and steals his/her pouch.*)

21 **TOUR GUIDE:** You there! Stop! (*To GUARD*) Guard, that
 22 boy/girl just stole my purse. I had four dinarii in there!
 23 (*GUARD quickly grabs the child and examines the purse before*
 24 *bringing it back to the TOUR GUIDE.*) Thank you, sir.
 25 (*Looking in purse*) Let's see . . . One, two, three . . . Hey!
 26 Where's my other . . . (*Quietly*) Never mind. (*GUARD walks*
 27 *away, admiring his coin. To GROUP*) It's hard to know which
 28 is worse — a child stealing four coins for a meal, or a
 29 soldier taking one coin for drink. (*Sighs*) Oh well, let's
 30 carry on. (*When everyone in the group has paid their admission*
 31 *fee and has a gold coin, TOUR GUIDE leads them to the TAX*
 32 *COLLECTOR's table.*)

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TAX COLLECTOR

(Scene 4)

(The TAX COLLECTOR should be seated at a small table just outside the city gate. [Could be an adjoining room.] He should have three containers on his table with these labels: ATONEMENT OFFERING [one-half shekel], FREEWILL OFFERING, and HOUSEHOLD TAX [will vary]. He should also have the parchment pieces with household information that the CENSUS TAKER has brought to him.)

TAX COLLECTOR: Over here, folks! Everyone over twenty must pay half a shekel into the treasury of the Lord to make atonement for your sins. And every household must pay taxes. (TOUR GUIDE goes first.)

TOUR GUIDE: (To GROUP) This tax paying . . . it is like being forced to eat bitter herbs . . . Ugh! In fact, I'd rather do that than be cheated by these Romans. Their own people don't have to pay taxes, while we are forced to pay *more* than our share so these tax collectors can use the surplus to buy their elaborate stone houses and gold jewelry! A half-shekel here (Drops dime into atonement offering), a dinarius here (Drops gold coin into freewill offering), and how much do I owe for my household tax?

TAX COLLECTOR: Let's see . . . according to these census papers, you have: one husband/wife; two sons, but too young to fight; three camels; and four pieces of gold. (Peering suspiciously at TOUR GUIDE) Are you *sure* this is all you own?

TOUR GUIDE: I am a man/woman of my word.

TAX COLLECTOR: All right, then, you owe . . . two — no, let's make it three dinarii.

TOUR GUIDE: (Protesting) But you said two at first!

TAX COLLECTOR: Are you arguing with me? I can make it four dinarii if you wish. (Smirks) There's some new purple silk in the clothier's shop that I wouldn't mind having.

1 TOUR GUIDE: (*Sighing heavily*) **Very well, then. Three**
2 dinarii. (*Drops three gold coins into the "Household Tax"*
3 container. The rest of the GROUP then proceeds to pay their
4 taxes. The TAX COLLECTOR should arbitrarily assign taxes,
5 seeming as though he has given it little thought. He may decide
6 he particularly likes someone — say, a pretty girl — and wave
7 her on through. He may also act dishonestly, perhaps being so
8 brazen as to dip right into the household tax container and put
9 it in his pouch! After everyone has paid taxes, TOUR GUIDE
10 leads the GROUP to the MUSICIAN.)
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MUSICIAN*(Scene 5)*

(The MUSICIAN doesn't need a stall; he/she can be sitting cross-legged on a blanket on the floor or in a tent. If planning to dance, make sure to allow sufficient room. A pottery cup with a few gold coins in it should be placed beside him. The MUSICIAN should play a recorder, guitar, or some other simple instrument. He/she may wish to have some helpers to sing and play along. Provide a few simple percussion instruments for the group to use. Print the words to the song on a parchment scroll and tack it on the wall behind him/her. As the group approaches, the MUSICIAN is playing "Song for Yahweh." Group listens while he/she plays entire song through once.)

MUSICIAN: *(After finishing song)* Ah, my friends! You have come to hear me play. You folks seem tired. Why don't you stop here and rest a spell?

TOUR GUIDE: We have just finished paying our taxes. Dealing with those Romans always makes me tired! I would rather listen to your beautiful music.

MUSICIAN: Music will make you forget your cares. I guarantee it! But I do not play for free, you know. *(Winks and places cup in obvious spot.)*

TOUR GUIDE: We won't forget about you, Lydia/Nathaniel. *(Puts coin in, encourages others to do the same.)*

MUSICIAN: It's getting harder to make my living, now that those Roman soldiers are all around. They don't appreciate our songs to Yahweh. Sometimes they run me off the street. *(Looks around.)* But they are not in sight, so — let's sing! I want you to join me — I'll teach you this song. It is one we sing in the synagogue on the Sabbath. It's about the Messiah that Yahweh has promised to send us. *(Proceeds to teach the GROUP "Song of Yahweh." May either pass out percussion instruments and/or encourage hand clapping, or teach them a simple four-step dance to go with the*

1 *song: step left, cross with right, step left, hop, do same in reverse.*
2 *GROUP should be in a circle with arms intertwined. Time*
3 *permitting, the whole song may be repeated.)*

4 **MUSICIAN:** What a joyful noise we made! Just like the
5 **Scriptures tell us to do: "Praise him with trumpets. Praise**
6 **him with harps and lyres. Praise him with drums and**
7 **dancing. Praise him with harps and flutes. Praise him**
8 **with cymbals. Praise him with loud cymbals. Praise the**
9 **Lord, all living creatures! Praise the Lord!" (Psalm 150:**
10 **3-6)**

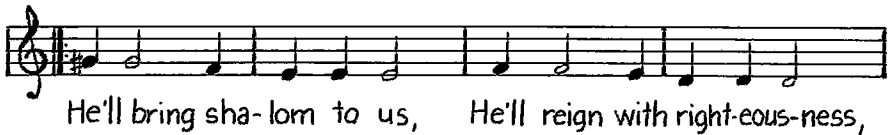
11 **TOUR GUIDE:** You've given our spirits a lift. Blessings on
12 **you, my friend! (TOUR GUIDE leads GROUP to POTTER's**
13 **stall.)**

14 **MUSICIAN:** Farewell! *(Goes back to playing "Song for Yahweh.")*

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SONG FOR YAHWEH
(Tune: "Hava Nagila")

Israeli Folk Song



MUSICIAN: **Marvelous! You folks sound so good, you could put me out of work! Why don't you help me with this next part? We'll start out slowly, until — we'll have a big finish and a** *(Raises fist.)* **Hey! at the end. Clap your hands if you'd like!**

slowly, increasing in tempo



POTTER

(Scene 6)

(The POTTER should have pottery vessels of several different sizes sitting around him, including a large pot, a pitcher, a lamp, and small containers with lids. Handcrafted ones are best — they can look rough and primitive. Carve a star on the front of at least some of them. A potter at work on a wheel is fascinating to watch, and it is worth making the extra effort to contact a college art department or someone outside your church who has this skill, if necessary. If you can't find someone to throw pots, you can either just mold clay by hand [and adjust dialog accordingly] or borrow a wheel and pretend, with the finished pots sitting around you.)

TOUR GUIDE: Hello, Martha/Samuel, my friend!

POTTER: Hello, Hannah/Benjamin! I see you've made some new friends. Have you all finished your census duties?

TOUR GUIDE: Yes, and now we're rewarding ourselves by strolling around the marketplace. *(To GROUP)* The potter — now, he/she intrigues me. I admire his/her skill. Just look! To be able to take a lump of heavy brown clay and create a useful and beautiful vessel from it, just as God took a lump of clay and created man — now, that is something. Too bad man is not always so useful for God!

POTTER: So true, so true! We humans have many flaws — and so can this clay. *(Picks it up.)* Sometimes there are too many impurities in it. Or air bubbles. They weaken the structure, and then when the pot is fired it can explode. Sometimes I get careless and work the clay too much until it is too soft to mold. Or I get anxious and don't let the pot dry completely before I fire it. Or use too much water, or work too fast. Sometimes I don't center the clay on the wheel just right, and then the pot becomes misshapen. *(Show example if you have one.)* You see, a lot of things can go wrong! But — when mistakes happen, *(Winks)*

1 the potter can save the clay. Even old, dried up clay can
2 be mixed with water and reused. I just start again and
3 reshape it into a whole new pot.

4 **TOUR GUIDE:** *(Nodding)* Ah. Just as God must sometimes
5 reshape us. *(To POTTER)* My friend, surely you know the
6 Scripture about the potter.

7 **POTTER:** *(Smiling)* I know it well. “Yet, O Lord, you are our
8 Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all
9 the work of your hand.” *(Isaiah 64:8, NIV*)*

10 **TOUR GUIDE:** Good words, those. *(Picking up a pot with a star*
11 *on the front)* I’m curious about the symbol that is etched
12 on many of your vessels. It’s a star, is it not?

13 **POTTER:** Yes. I’m compelled to carve it on my pots. It’s a bit
14 of Scripture that keeps running through my head: “I look
15 into the future, and I see the nation of Israel. A king, like
16 a bright star, will arise in that nation . . .” *(Numbers 23:*
17 *17)* Isn’t that marvelous? As stars light the night, so will
18 this king illumine the darkness in our souls. *(Leaning*
19 *toward the group excitedly)* I have a strong feeling that our
20 King — our Messiah — will be here soon. I have seen an
21 unusual star lighting the sky the past few nights. I believe
22 it’s a sign. I feel it in here. *(Points to heart.)* So anyway — the
23 star has become my personal symbol of hope — and I put
24 it on many pots: these large ones for cooking food, the
25 lamps, the pitchers, and the small ones with lids that
26 hold perfume and oil.

27 **TOUR GUIDE:** Beautiful! *(Encourages the group to respond.)*

28 **POTTER:** Thank you for those kind words. But remember —
29 it is not what the pot looks like on the outside that
30 determines its worth, but rather its contents and
31 usefulness. Go now and be filled with blessing so that
32 you may be useful to God! *(TOUR GUIDE leads GROUP to*
33 *the SPICE SELLER.)*

34 *Scripture quotation marked (NIV) is from the Holy Bible, New Interna-
35 tional Version © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used
by permission.

SPICE SELLER

(Scene 7)

(Obtain a variety of spices, but be sure to have the following, as they are referred to in the script: anise, cinnamon, mint, and salt. Try to get them in their original form, i.e. mint leaves, cinnamon sticks, etc. Get a salt block from a pet store. Frankincense and myrrh are difficult to obtain, so frankincense is merely implied as being in the scent of incense. Use a spicy-smelling perfume for myrrh. Put the spices and herbs in pottery containers. Also have incense burning or potpourri simmering. As the GROUP approaches, SPICE SELLER is grating cinnamon sticks with a rough rock. Add some powdered cinnamon so it will appear as if she's really making some progress. A CENTURION or GUARD should be stationed nearby.)

TOUR GUIDE: So nice to see you, Ruth! *(Inhaling deeply)* Ahhhh . . . the fragrance, the sweet aroma! *(To GROUP)* You're in for a treat here at the spice shop, my friends! Ruth, would you show us some of your finest spices?

SPICE SELLER: With pleasure. *(After telling about a spice, she passes it around for the GROUP to smell.)* I scraped this cinnamon from the bark of a laurel tree, and now I'm grinding it with this stone into a powder. *(Demonstrates)* Can you smell the cinnamon in my incense?

TOUR GUIDE: Yes, and if my nose does not mislead me, I smell frankincense in there also.

SPICE SELLER: You're right. *(To GROUP)* Frankincense is very rare. Another extra-special spice is myrrh. I mixed myrrh with olive oil and rose petals to create this valuable perfume. Frankincense and myrrh are wonderful, but unfortunately only the very wealthy can buy them because they are so costly. It's too bad that the average citizen cannot afford them. But I sell many spices that anyone can afford.

TOUR GUIDE: I'm sure Miriam, the baker, buys many shekels

1 of this anise from you.

2 **SPICE SELLER:** Yes, she does. She sometime uses it to flavor

3 that wonderful bread she bakes. And many villagers buy

4 it to offer as part of their tithe at the synagogue.

5 **TOUR GUIDE:** Where did you get that salt?

6 **SPICE SELLER:** From the Dead Sea. There's no better spice

7 for preserving our food, or for bringing out the true flavor

8 of meat.

9 **TOUR GUIDE:** *(Picking up a mint leaf)* I love the fresh smell of

10 this mint.

11 **SPICE SELLER:** The mint is the easiest spice to get. It grows

12 wild all around Bethlehem! I use it in medicine when my

13 son is sick — it disguises the bitter taste. *(Some ROMAN*

14 *GUARDS come by to urge the GROUP to move along. SPICE*

15 *SELLER lowers voice.)* I can't say much with them

16 *(Motioning toward ROMAN GUARDS)* around — but listen

17 carefully as you walk through the marketplace — there

18 are some interesting rumors going around.

19 **TOUR GUIDE:** Oh, really? What — *(He is cut off by one of the*

20 *GUARDS.)* We may be back later to buy some spices.

21 **SPICE SELLER:** I would welcome your return. Go with God.

22 **TOUR GUIDE:** *(Leading GROUP to the BAKER)* I'm curious

23 about the rumors. What do you suppose is happening?

24 Let's find out what we can.

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BAKER*(Scene 8)*

(In the stall, arrange round barley loaves and unleavened wheat loaves on pottery plates or baskets. Have some prebroken — not cut! — and buttered for your visitors. Barley is a grain that is mentioned in the Bible; but you can use any grain for the bread. Biscuit dough made with whole wheat flour that is rolled out flat and cut into large circles makes the loaves of unleavened wheat bread. Have some ingredients like flour, honey, and figs sitting out in pottery containers. You may also have other baked goods for sale, but try to make them look authentic, if possible. No frosted Christmas cookies! The BAKER's family may be helping him/her. As the group approaches, he/she is kneading some bread dough and singing or whistling happily.)

TOUR GUIDE: Greetings, Miriam/Jonathan! You seem extra happy today! My friends and I followed our noses and found ourselves here. Is there any finer smell than the aroma of freshly baked bread? *(Points to baked goods.)* I see you and your helpers have been busy.

BAKER: We certainly have. This census is bringing the people through in droves — and they are *all* hungry and need their daily bread! *(Glancing at the heavens)* We could use some manna about now.

TOUR GUIDE: Indeed. Manna, the miracle seed that fell from heaven for our traveling ancestors. It sustained them through their long journey from Egypt to Sinai. They ground it up and made cakes that the Scriptures say tasted like wafers made with honey. *(Pats stomach.)* All this talk about food is making me hungry! Tell us what is fresh out of the ovens today.

BAKER: *(Pointing)* Today we're featuring barley loaves. And here are flat wheat loaves. This unleavened bread serves as a reminder of God's grace in delivering our people from slavery under Pharaoh. Pieces of bread are three

1 **lepta each. Would anyone like some?** (*Allow time for the*
 2 *exchange of money and bread, and also to briefly describe any*
 3 *other baked goods you're selling, like fig cakes, sweet bread, etc.*)
 4 **Does everyone have some?** (*Bowing head*) **Let's pray. El**
 5 **Shaddai, God Almighty, bless this food. May it give us**
 6 **strength to do your will. Amen.** (*Lifting head up*) **I'm too**
 7 **excited to eat right now. I just heard some incredible**
 8 **news!**

9 **TOUR GUIDE:** Ruth told us there was an interesting rumor
 10 going around. What wonderful thing is happening in our
 11 little village?

12 **BAKER:** It's about a baby that was just born. They're saying
 13 he is the Messiah!

14 **TOUR GUIDE:** (*Gasps*) The Messiah? Can it really be, after all
 15 these years? You know, Martha/Samuel, the Potter saw
 16 an unusually bright star in the sky that he/she felt was
 17 a sign of the coming Savior. Oh, I pray that it's true. Tell
 18 me, Miriam/Jonathan — do you know where this baby is?

19 **BAKER:** I only wish I knew.

20 **TOUR GUIDE:** My friends and I — we'd like to find out more!
 21 **Shalom!** (*TOUR GUIDE leads GROUP to the CARPENTER's*
 22 *stall.*)

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CARPENTER

(Scene 9)

(The CARPENTER's shop should have pieces of lumber stacked around, as well as a half-finished project or two. He should be working with wood in a Bible-times manner — for instance, hammering with a simple wooden mallet, measuring wood from elbow to fingertip (one cubit), or marking up boards with a piece of stone used like chalk. Some stones write better than others; experiment with different kinds.)

TOUR GUIDE: Elijah! Greetings, my friend!

CARPENTER: (Still working) Benjamin/Hannah, so nice of you to drop by!

TOUR GUIDE: I wanted to show my friends here Bethlehem's finest carpenter in action!

CARPENTER: (Modestly) You are too kind. My father was a good teacher — I learned everything I know from him. This census has brought many fine carpenters from distant villages to my shop, like Obadiah from Palestine, Cain from Judea, and a very skilled carpenter from Nazareth named Joseph. They told me of the fine houses and boats they have built. Some of them even had the honor of doing repair work on the Temple in Jerusalem!

TOUR GUIDE: A high honor for a carpenter, indeed! What kinds of wood are here in the shop today?

CARPENTER: This fragrant-smelling one is cedar. (Pass around for the group to smell.) I also have some sturdy oak for tables and chairs, some light-colored ash wood, and I also have mulberry cyprus, and acacia on hand.

TOUR GUIDE: How do you get the pieces of wood so uniform looking?

CARPENTER: These pieces of wood were carefully measured. All of them are one cubit long. Like this. (Demonstrates) I measure from my elbow to my fingertip — that's one cubit. Next, I mark the board with this chalky stone. Then

1 **I cut them with a saw.**

2 **TOUR GUIDE:** I see. What projects are you working on now?

3 **CARPENTER:** I am building a house for a wealthy family
4 here in Bethlehem. It is far better than the flat-roofed
5 mud huts that most of us live in. It will be made of stone
6 with many rooms, unlike our one-roomed dwellings.
7 Quite magnificent! I am also building a tomb. And then
8 there is this little doll for my daughter, Rachel. (*Show a*
9 *crude wooden doll.*) I am quite fond of my little one. She is
10 just a baby.

11 **TOUR GUIDE:** Elijah, have you heard about a special baby
12 that was born here last night? All of Bethlehem is talking
13 about it. They're saying he is the Messiah.

14 **CARPENTER:** That carpenter from Nazareth — Joseph —
15 his wife was with him when they came by this morning.
16 They didn't stay long because she was great with child
17 and they felt her time might be soon. But they seemed
18 to be just a common couple. (*Pauses*) Then again, there
19 *did* seem to be something special about them. (*Skeptical*
20 *again*) But parents of the Messiah? Hmmm . . . I just don't
21 know. It seems too impossible. (*Thinks, then gets out wood.*)
22 But, perhaps I should start making a toy for the little
23 one — just in case, you know, he *is* the Messiah.

24 **TOUR GUIDE:** Sure — just in case. We'll let you get back to
25 work. Shalom, my friend! (*TOUR GUIDE leads GROUP in*
26 *the direction of the CLOTHIER's stall. En route, they are*
27 *interrupted by a RUNAWAY SLAVE.*)

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RUNAWAY SLAVE

(Scene 10)

(The SLAVE runs up to the GROUP as they are leaving the CARPENTER's stall. A GUARD should be positioned nearby, ready to catch the SLAVE.)

SLAVE: (Running up to the GROUP) Hey! Can I travel with your group?

TOUR GUIDE: You're welcome to join us, but we're not traveling far. We're just strolling through the marketplace here. Uh, excuse me, but I see that your ear is pierced. Are you here with your master?

SLAVE: (Looking over his shoulder) Yes . . . er, well, no. You see, I served my master faithfully for seven years. As a Hebrew slave, I had the option of going free at that point, but I was happy with my master and his family — and besides, I had a family of my own to support, so I had my ear pierced with an awl to show that I would be his servant for life. What a mistake.

TOUR GUIDE: What's wrong? Surely you had a better life with your master than you will have as a poor fugitive. You had food, clothing, shelter, and probably even a small salary, but as a fugitive . . .

SLAVE: As a fugitive, I will be *free*. I would rather sleep in the streets a free man than remain a slave to that man. You see, he is not the same master he used to be. He turned hard and bitter, and now I'm trapped. I decided that this census, with all the commotion, would be my best chance to escape — you know, blend in with the crowd. My family is supposed to meet me later by the city gate. So can I please . . .

ROMAN GUARD: (Rushing up to the group) You there! Stop! (SLAVE runs away with GUARD in hot pursuit.)

TOUR GUIDE: We Jews pride ourselves on treating slaves well . . . almost like part of the family. Many are freed

1 after a period of seven years or so. And they're even given
2 a sum of money as a parting gift. But some choose to stay
3 with their master, as he did. There are good masters and
4 bad masters . . . and good masters that turn bad, like his
5 did. I wish him luck. We'd better keep moving. (*Leads*
6 *GROUP to the CLOTHIER's stall.*)
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CLOTHIER

(Scene 11)

(The CLOTHIER should be seated with lengths of various types of material hanging up around him/her. Fabrics should include: a linen, a purple silky-type material, a neutral-colored wool, and a soft, white material like cotton, among others. Plain or striped material is best — don't include patterned fabrics that look too modern. Also include something that has been embroidered, like a piece of cloth or a robe. When GROUP approaches, CLOTHIER can be folding or examining a piece of cloth.)

TOUR GUIDE: Hello there, Anna/James.

CLOTHIER: Good evening, Hannah/Benjamin. Have you brought me some business?

TOUR GUIDE: I don't know if any of these folks want to buy, but your beautiful fabrics waving in the breeze caught my eye. We'd like to see what you have. *(Pointing)* This looks like a nice linen.

CLOTHIER: You have a good eye! This byssos, or linen, is woven right here in Palestine, and it is the finest linen in the world — much smoother than Egyptian linen. Feel it — smooth as silk, is it not? *(Passes it around.)*

TOUR GUIDE: Speaking of silk, where did this gorgeous purple silk come from?

CLOTHIER: Most of my silks and cottons are imported from Egypt and Persia. It is a long and dangerous trip, and that's why they are so expensive. Obviously, these fabrics are generally purchased by the well-to-do merchants and Romans who want to display their wealth.

TOUR GUIDE: They're not purchased by me, that's for sure! *(To GROUP)* When we want to decorate our robes, we have them embroidered, like this. *(Points out example)* We common people usually wear clothes woven from flax, or wool, when we need extra warmth. *(Points out examples.)* Fortunately, there are a lot of sheep around Bethlehem

1 to keep us supplied with wool, and Anna here does a
 2 terrific job of weaving it tightly so it keeps us warm. And
 3 she works so quickly, too — her fingers just fly!

4 **CLOTHIER:** Well, I have loads of time to practice. The actual
 5 weaving goes quickly, but then I have to examine the
 6 finished cloth for defects. That takes a long time.

7 **TOUR GUIDE:** (*Smoothing robe*) But we sure do like the end
 8 result!

9 **CLOTHIER:** And I like making robes for my friends here in
 10 Bethlehem! This soft white material made from flax is
 11 one of my least expensive fabrics, but (*Puts it up to her*
 12 *cheek*) how I love it! It's what we use for our newborns.
 13 We tear this soft cloth into strips — “swaddling clothes” —
 14 and wrap our newborns from their neck to their toes.
 15 Movement is very bad for a baby's limbs, you know. Their
 16 little arms and legs won't grow straight and strong unless
 17 they're wrapped up in this. (*Smiles*) Every time I touch
 18 it, it reminds me of my babies.

19 **TOUR GUIDE:** Speaking of babies, have you heard about any
 20 births here in Bethlehem?

21 **CLOTHIER:** A young woman and her husband stopped by
 22 earlier today. I didn't recognize her; I suppose she is here
 23 because of the census. She was large with child. Her
 24 husband bought some swaddling clothes. I guess that
 25 means their child is about to be born!

26 **TOUR GUIDE:** Oh, that's marvelous!

27 **CLOTHIER:** (*Confused at TOUR GUIDE's excitement*) Well yes,
 28 a baby's birth is always exciting, but you don't even know
 29 this family.

30 **TOUR GUIDE:** You must have been stuck at your loom all
 31 day! A baby has been born, and everyone's saying it is
 32 the Messiah!

33 **CLOTHIER:** The Messiah?! You mean I may have actually
 34 seen the parents of the Messiah? Oh, I wish I had
 35 known... I would have left my shop and walked with

1 **them, to see if I could help.**

2 **TOUR GUIDE:** We're trying to find out more about it. It's
3 **just talk right now, but everything we've heard reinforces**
4 **my faith. I believe we will see him for ourselves!**

5 **CLOTHIER:** I wish you well, my friends. If you find him,
6 **come and tell me so that I may worship him, too!**

7 **TOUR GUIDE:** You can count on it. (*Leads GROUP to the*
8 *synagogue.*)

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SYNAGOGUE

(Scene 12)

(The synagogue should be fairly ornate. See diagram for details. As the group approaches, the RABBI is standing and talking with two STUDENTS who are seated on the steps or beside the entrance door. They are reading Scripture verses from scrolls made of strips of parchment that have been wound on dowels.)

TOUR GUIDE: This lovely building is our synagogue; the center of life in Bethlehem. This is where we come for religious instruction and worship when we can't get to the temple in Jerusalem. I see that our learned rabbi is instructing some students in the Holy Scriptures here on the steps. Let's stop for a minute and listen in on a bit of the lesson. *(Gathers the GROUP around the steps.)*

STUDENT 1: Rabbi, surely you have heard the talk around town today. People are talking about an unusual star in the sky last night.

STUDENT 2: And they're saying that the Messiah has been born right here in Bethlehem.

STUDENT 1: If anyone would understand it, you would, Rabbi. Can you tell us what these signs mean?

RABBI: My son, I wish I had all the answers for you. I read and I study the Scriptures, but God's ways are not man's ways. We cannot completely understand the future. I am waiting to find out what will happen, just as you are. But remember your lessons on the prophets? I think we can find some clues in their words. *(To STUDENT 1)* Jacob, read the prophecy of Micah concerning Bethlehem.

STUDENT 1: *(Reading from scroll)* Bethlehem, you are one of the smallest towns in Judah, but out of you I will bring a ruler for Israel, whose family line goes back to ancient times. *(Micah 5:2)*

RABBI: That passage clearly shows that the Messiah will come out of Bethlehem. Amos, what does the prophet

1 **Jeremiah say about the coming Messiah?**

2 **STUDENT 2:** *(Reading from scroll)* The Lord says, “The time is
3 coming when I will choose as king a righteous descendant
4 of David. That king will rule wisely and do what is right
5 and just throughout the land. When he is king, the people
6 of Judah will be safe, and the people of Israel will live
7 in peace. He will be called ‘The Lord Our Salvation.’”
8 *(Jeremiah 23: 5,6)*

9 **RABBI:** Without question, this census has been instrumental
10 in gathering the descendants of David’s line back here
11 to Bethlehem . . . which certainly makes it more likely
12 *now* that the Messiah be born of David’s line, as Jeremiah
13 predicted, and in Bethlehem, as Micah foretold.

14 **STUDENT 1:** Rabbi, do not the Scriptures also clearly say
15 that he will deliver us from our oppressors? *(Reading from*
16 *scroll)* Shout for joy, you people of Jerusalem! Your king
17 will make peace among the nations; he will rule from sea
18 to sea. *(Zechariah 9: 9,10)* Zechariah said that. Does this
19 mean Roman rule will be overthrown?

20 **RABBI:** *(Rushes over to STUDENT 1.)* Shhhh! Quiet! It is
21 dangerous to even speak of such things! The very walls
22 have ears! Did not Herod kill his own sons to save his
23 throne? He wouldn’t have much mercy for another king!
24 *(Softening)* It is good to have an inquisitive mind — but
25 be careful. *(Looks around; lowers voice.)* My son, I hope you
26 are right.

27 **STUDENT 2:** Teacher, what will this Messiah’s name be?

28 **RABBI:** Interesting question, Amos. The prophet Isaiah
29 lists several: “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,”
30 “Eternal Father,” and “Prince of Peace.” I do not know
31 what name he will be commonly known by. Based on my
32 own research and thought, I believe Isaiah is predicting
33 that he will have many roles to fulfill. *(Squinting up as if*
34 *at the sun)* The sun is dropping; we must go. Let’s
35 summarize today’s lesson. We know that a Messiah king

1 is to be born in Bethlehem. He will be a descendant of
2 David. He will bring peace to the nation and he will serve
3 in many capacities for the people. For our next lesson, I
4 want you to research the other prophecies concerning
5 this Messiah, like his being pierced for our
6 transgressions. Come prepared to discuss what you think
7 this means. (*JOSHUA walks up to the steps. RABBI prepares*
8 *to leave; then spots prophet.*) Joshua! Have you a prophecy
9 from the Lord today?

10 **JOSHUA:** (*Climbing steps and addressing group*) The Lord says,
11 I will keep my promise to send you a king. The time is
12 nigh when you will see the Savior, the light to the
13 Gentiles, the glory of Israel. Lo, it is even this night.

14 **TOUR GUIDE:** (*Excitedly*) Did you hear that? Tonight —
15 the prophet thinks we will see the Savior tonight! Let's
16 hurry along! (*TOUR GUIDE leads group to the inn.*)

INNKEEPER

(Scene 13)

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(*INNKEEPER sits on a stool or tree stump outside of his inn.*)

TOUR GUIDE: Up ahead is one of Bethlehem's inns. Most of the inns around here have one large room where several families and their smaller livestock set up camp. Maybe my friend Lazarus, the innkeeper, has room for you tonight. The inn is crowded and noisy, yes, but — it's a place to lay your head. I know it's growing late, and yet I sense that you are excited, like I am, about the chance to see our Messiah. Let's not settle down for the night just yet.

INNKEEPER: (*Steps outside as the GROUP approaches the inn.*) Hannah/Benjamin! It's good to see you again. And so many friends with you! I would like to have all you people stay here, but I don't have any more room. My inn is completely full.

TOUR GUIDE: I take it that business is good, Lazarus.

INNKEEPER: Good?! I barely have room for my own family since this census started. (*The INNKEEPER's WIFE comes up behind him to see who he is talking to.*) We were even forced to keep some boarders in our barn.

WIFE: Do you believe it? Why, tonight we even had to send a young couple who were expecting a baby out to the stable. The poor girl, she's hardly more than a child herself. (*Gossipy*) She looked pretty far along. I think she could give birth right in our stable! To tell you the truth, they were probably better off in there than in here, with all the noise and filth . . .

INNKEEPER: (*Trying to cover up what his WIFE just said*) Ahem! Esther, I believe one of the guests needs help. (*WIFE exits.*) (*Apologetically*) My wife — she likes to talk . . .

TOUR GUIDE: Forgive me, Lazarus, but I know your wife, uh, exaggerates the truth a bit sometimes. Are things as

1 she has said?

2 **INNKEEPER:** This time, yes. (*Pauses and looks bewildered.*) I
3 have always been a rational man, but . . . I can't forget
4 about that couple. Now most young girls . . . if my own
5 daughter had to give birth in a stable, well, she'd be in
6 hysterics, to be sure! But this one . . . though you could
7 see she was in pain, there was peace in her eyes.

8 **TOUR GUIDE:** Lazarus, have you heard any of the rumors
9 around the village about —

10 **SHEPHERD:** (*Running up excitedly and interrupting*) Lazarus!
11 Hannah/Benjamin! Friends! Our Messiah is here! Our
12 Savior has been born tonight!

13 **INNKEEPER:** Come here and catch your breath. (*A pause*)
14 Now what's this you're saying about a Messiah?

15 **SHEPHERD:** It's true! Our Savior was born tonight in a
16 stable — *your* stable, Lazarus!

17 **INNKEEPER:** You mean —

18 **SHEPHERD:** Just a little while ago we were in a field. We
19 planned to be there all night, taking care of our flocks.
20 We were whistling, calling the sheep to the stream to
21 drink, when all of a sudden, a radiant being — an angel —
22 appeared, right out of nowhere! I was scared! I thought
23 perhaps I was seeing things because it was so late. But
24 then the angel said, "Don't be afraid! I am here with good
25 news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people.
26 This very day in David's town your Savior was born —
27 Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you:
28 you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a
29 manger." (*Luke 2: 10-12*) And then — well, I know this
30 sounds too fantastic to be true . . .

31 **TOUR GUIDE:** Tell us!

32 **SHEPHERD:** Well, the whole sky was filled with these
33 brilliant, white angels — dozens of them! Their radiance
34 made the night sky shine as bright as day. And they sang
35 the most beautiful songs to God. You've never heard such

1 glorious melodies — layer after layer of exquisite
2 harmony. (*Looks heavenward.*) “Glory to God in the highest,
3 and peace on earth!”

4 **TOUR GUIDE:** (*With guarded excitement*) You mean the baby
5 the village has been talking about is in *his* (*Pointing to*
6 *Lazarus*) stable?

7 **SHEPHERD:** That’s right. We all just left our flocks out in the
8 field and ran to Bethlehem. Some of the others are in the
9 stable with the baby right now.

10 **TOUR GUIDE:** Do you think we — I mean, I know this is a
11 private moment, but we’ve been hearing about this baby
12 all day long and we would love the honor of seeing him —
13 to see and hear for ourselves.

14 **SHEPHERD:** I know you’d be welcome.

15 **INNKEEPER:** Follow me. (*Leads the GROUP to the stable.*)

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STABLE

(Scene 14)

(The stable scene may be held in an adjoining room to the marketplace area. The room should look rough and small. Disguise anything modern with burlap draped over the top, or cardboard. The lighting can really set the mood here. It should be dim, with perhaps a spot on the manger. Time permitting, you may have animal sound effects softly playing in the background and large, papier-mâché and chicken wire animals. Scatter hay on the floor. If your church has a manger on hand, use it, but if not, you may have to improvise from a sawhorse. Having a real baby as baby Jesus greatly adds to the realism. Weather permitting, it is effective to have the stable scene outside in a "live Nativity," with real animals. MARY should be kneeling on a blanket with JOSEPH beside her, and the manger in the middle. The SHEPHERDS [two or more] are standing off to one side. The door should be closed.)

INNKEEPER: *(Speaks as the GROUP approaches the door of the stable.)* I feel torn apart inside. Part of me is utterly elated, and yet I feel ashamed. The Messiah was born here, but all I could provide for him was the stable where we keep our animals! If only I had known . . .

SHEPHERD 1: Lazarus, you mustn't feel that way! That's just how the Messiah was supposed to be born — the manger was our proof! That angel must have known the skeptical nature of shepherds, for he said, "This is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." *(Luke 2:12)* Don't you see, Lazarus? The Messiah couldn't have come into the world in the usual way, or we may not have recognized him. The manger was our proof! Besides — you and I, we are common folk. If this Messiah had been born in a palace, like a king is supposed to, he'd seem so unreachable. This way, I feel like he will be there for common people like us. *(Turning*

1 *to GROUP) Come inside, friends. (Opens door. There is silence*
 2 *as everyone gazes at the scene. After a pause, the SHEPHERD*
 3 *introduces the family.) This is Mary and Joseph and their*
 4 *little one.* I would like to stay and worship him with*
 5 *you, but this news is too wonderful to contain in this*
 6 *stable! I must tell anyone — I must tell everyone about*
 7 *the miracle here tonight! (SHEPHERD exits.)*

8 **TOUR GUIDE:** *(Addressing couple)* Mary ... Joseph ... we
 9 have been all over our village today, hoping to see this
 10 child for ourselves. And now here he is, in Bethlehem,
 11 wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger, just like the
 12 angel told the shepherds. Now that I see him, I'm
 13 overwhelmed that this tiny baby is the Messiah, the
 14 Savior, the one we have waited for throughout the years.

15 **MARY:** Giving birth is truly a miracle ... and then when I
 16 consider that this little boy will affect the lives of many ...
 17 well, I'm deeply touched in a way that is hard to explain.
 18 I would feel overjoyed to be the mother of *any* baby, but
 19 to be chosen by God to bear his son is an awesome honor.
 20 I'll probably never feel completely deserving of it. I don't
 21 have many worldly goods or much prestige, but what I
 22 *do* have is a heart that loves this baby dearly.

23 **TOUR GUIDE:** Just how did God choose you, Mary?

24 **MARY:** An angel came to me nine months ago and said that I
 25 had found favor in the sight of the Lord and that I would
 26 have a son which would be the Christ. I didn't
 27 understand, since I was an unmarried virgin. But the
 28 angel said that the spirit of the Lord would overshadow
 29 me and I would conceive without losing my honor.

30 **TOUR GUIDE:** The pieces just keep fitting together. Another
 31 fulfillment of Scripture. The prophet Isaiah foretold that
 32 a virgin would conceive and bear a son whose name
 33 would mean "God is with us." *(To JOSEPH)* Joseph, didn't
 34 you think Mary was being unfaithful? You know what
 35 the law says about that. Did you have any second thoughts

1 about going through with the marriage contract?

2 **JOSEPH:** I felt betrayed at first, yes. But one night the angel
3 appeared to me in a dream. He said that Mary had not
4 dishonored me; that she had conceived a child by the
5 Spirit of God. *(To one of the SHEPHERDS)* I'm sure you
6 understand that when an angel tells you something, you
7 know it is true!

8 **SHEPHERD:** Without a doubt!

9 **JOSEPH:** Suddenly, what the gossips in Nazareth were
10 saying didn't bother us at all. It was enough to know that
11 Mary and I were part of God's plan for bringing the Savior
12 into this world. We are dedicated to the care and
13 upbringing of this child God entrusted to us. I know he
14 is not just *my* son, but the Son of God. We don't know
15 how it will be accomplished, but we believe that this little
16 baby will change the world.

17 **TOUR GUIDE:** *(Motions the GROUP to kneel around the manger.*
18 *Softly leads the group in one verse of "Silent Night." After a*
19 *pause, to MARY and JOSEPH)* **Glory to God! You are indeed**
20 **blessed!** *(TOUR GUIDE stands and leads the GROUP from*
21 *the room and back to their starting point.)*

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33 **Jesus' name would not be known on the night of his birth. Although the*
34 *angel had named him before he was even conceived, Mary and Joseph*
35 *waited a week before having their son circumcised and named, as was*
 the custom of the day (Luke 2:21).

CONCLUSION

(Scene 15)

TOUR GUIDE: *(To the GROUP)* I'm in awe, my friends . . . to think that the tiny baby we saw is the Messiah! But the timing of this census, the prophecies that have come to pass, and the testimony of that family in the stable make me realize that our expected Savior is here — and we have *seen* him for ourselves! I'm sorry I must leave you here, but I've got to run home and tell my family this wonderful news! I'm sure you, too, must be anxious to discuss what we've seen and find lodging for the night — if sleep is possible on this extraordinary night! Thank you for letting me show you through Bethlehem's marketplace. You're welcome to return if you have time. Shalom, my friends. Spread the good news that our Lord has come!

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THE BETHLEHEM EXPERIENCE

Performance Guide

by Rhonda Wray



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PRODUCTION NOTES

WHAT IS *THE BETHLEHEM EXPERIENCE*?

The Bethlehem Experience is a step back through time. You are there in the marketplace of Bethlehem on the night of the Messiah's birth. It is somewhat crowded and noisy — remember, there was a census going on! It is a feast for the senses: the smell of exotic spices, the festive sound of Jewish music, the sight of robed and sandaled merchants in their stalls, the taste of freshly baked unleavened bread, and the soft feel of flaxen “swaddling clothes.”

The Bethlehem Experience is a walk-through tour that takes place in a large room of your church. Each stop along the tour is an experiential “learning center” where you meet a different biblical character and discover his/her area of expertise. It is a “you are there” recreation that is both entertaining and a tool for Christian education — a very special event for Advent to get people thinking of the first Christmas. There are ample opportunities for church members of all ages to both help in the presentation or stroll through the marketplace. *The Bethlehem Experience* can be your church's Christmas present to the community. People of all ages, denominations, and walks of life will be enchanted by this “live” presentation. Depending on how your program is structured, this can also be a good fund raiser. This program is likely to become a tradition, repeated year after year. New props and costumes may be added each time.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Tour Guides lead groups of about 10 people (encourage family participation) through the various stalls/rooms in order. Small groups are best, as it is easier to stay together and it is more personal. The groups are staggered in 10 minute intervals. (This may take some adjusting on your part, depending on how long your tour is. Figure on *at least* one hour.) At each stop, a character describes his/her bibletimes trade. At the same time, a rumor is going around the village that the long-awaited Messiah has been born — a tiny baby!

BENEFITS

The rewards of *The Bethlehem Experience* are many. They include:

Togetherness — This is a great activity for unifying individual families as well as your church family. The experiential, “hands on” nature of the program creates ample opportunities for interaction.

Learning — The scripts are based on biblical research so that the situations will be as authentic as possible. Each stop along the tour yields new information in an easy-to-understand format.

Christmas — The reality of the first Christmas is presented in an arresting way. Experiencing the event of Christ's birth makes it very real, as opposed to simply reading it from Luke 2. The program is a social event that emphasizes the spiritual in the season of shopping, parties, and general holiday chaos.

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Community — Your church will benefit from the exposure to the community. With the proper publicity (even just one article in the local paper works wonders), your program will attract a good-sized crowd of people to your church. ***The Bethlehem Experience*** could become a yearly tradition!

Fun — All ages respond to the excitement of the marketplace and the wonder of Christ's birth.

DRAMATIC TREATMENT

The marketplace is the center stage. A variety of costumed performers enact their portion of the script, having memorized it previously. Some ad lib may be necessary, especially for the Tour Guides. Most parts may be performed by males or females.

Casting — Try to match hobbies and professions with roles. What better person to play a biblical carpenter than an actual carpenter! Utilize as many persons in your church as you can, but don't hesitate to go outside your church if you need more actors — you should be able to find talented actors at community theatres or high school drama departments.

Use as many extras as you can; however, if you are short on actors, you may cut out a few of the scenes without sacrificing the overall quality of the program.

Tempo — The action is fast-paced, as the groups visit one stall briefly and move on. The mood goes from the hum-drum business of paying taxes, to excitement and anticipation when the rumors start about the Messiah's birth, to complete joy and wonder at the awesome sight of the holy family in the stable. Interest is sparked along the way by the "hands on" learning experiences at the various merchants' and artisans' stalls.

Rehearsal — Most of the rehearsal can be done on an individual basis, since this program is mostly a series of monologs. In the few scenes where there are more characters, (as in the Synagogue scene, with the Rabbi, the two Students, and the Prophet) the actors will find it helpful to practice together a few times. The director should check periodically to make sure all the actors are memorizing their parts. Those with longer parts, like the Tour Guides, may wish to jot some key words or phrases on a piece of parchment to prompt their memorization. A dress rehearsal is a must to work the "bugs" out of the program.

TOUR GUIDE INFORMATION

Your roles are **very** important. You will direct your guests to each stop along the way while providing narration and commentary about life in Bethlehem. In addition to familiarizing yourself with the **entire** script (not just your part), read the "Extras" information so you will know how to respond to the various characters you may encounter on your way.

Memorization — Desired, but because you are required to speak in all 15 scenes, you might want to carry a parchment with promptings in your money pouch. Just make sure your playbook or notes are disguised somehow.

Communication — You must speak loudly and clearly. The marketplace area will get noisy, but you are responsible for your group's understanding of life in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth.

Character — The minute you slip your robe over your head, you are Hannah or Benjamin of Bethlehem. Stay in character at all times. Unplanned situations might catch you by surprise, or you may need to slow your group down or hurry them up. Be thinking of ways you can ad lib while being true to your biblical character.

Set the Mood — Let the group feel your growing excitement as you first hear the rumors about the Messiah's birth, then see him for yourselves. Be dramatic!

Rotation — There may be anywhere from four Tour Guides to ten or more, depending on the anticipated crowd. It's best if you adhere to a certain order. New tours will start about every ten minutes. (The Director will cue you in.) This allows each person to rest between tours or to take part in the general atmosphere of the crowded town while keeping track of his/her place in the rotation. You will go through the rotation as many times as necessary during the evening.

CAST*(By Scene)*

- Scene 1: Introduction — Guard, Beggar
Scene 2: Census Taker, Guard
Scene 3: Money Changer, Pickpocket, Guard
Scene 4: Tax Collector
Scene 5: Musician
Scene 6: Potter
Scene 7: Spice Seller, Guard
Scene 8: Baker
Scene 9: Carpenter
Scene 10: Runaway Slave, Guard
Scene 11: Clothier
Scene 12: Students 1 and 2, Rabbi, Prophet
Scene 13: Innkeeper, Wife, Shepherd
Scene 14: Mary, Joseph, Shepherds, Baby Jesus, Innkeeper
Scene 15: Conclusion

Tour Guides appear in all 15 scenes.

EXTRAS

If you are fortunate enough to have more actors than parts, they may be easily cast as extras, such as:

Beggars — Tour Guides shouldn't let the beggars hold up the progress of their group, but Beggars should be acknowledged. They should drop a coin in their pouch. If they don't have one, they should direct the Beggars to a merchant who may help — e.g. "Ask the Baker if you may have a crust of bread." Remember, the Jewish people took care of their own! Beggars can be a good source of information on the spacing of the tours. Tour Guides may engage them in conversation if they need to hold their group back.

Roman Soldiers/Guards/Centurions — Five scenes call for specific dialog or action from these military men, but more can be used to control the flow of the tours. They can hurry groups along or slow them down, if necessary. They are not liked but they are powerful, so the people of Bethlehem are generally submissive and respectful to them to avoid conflict.

Merchants — You may wish to have more merchants than the ones listed in the scripts, such as: a goldsmith, scribe, weaver, storyteller, physician, winemaker, fruit vendor, or tent maker. Although they won't have specific dialog, they should have a brief description of their wares ready if the Tour Guides have time to stop. If Tour Guides are pressed for time, they should just point the merchants out and keep going, as the guests may go back after the tour to shop.

Other Extras — Pickpockets, shepherds, townspeople, or game-playing children.

STAGING REQUIREMENTS

Facility — A church assembly hall, basement, or gymnasium works best. If your facility has some smaller rooms alongside the large room, you may use them for the Census Taker, Money Changer, Tax Collector, and the Stable Scene.

Set Pieces — It is best to have a stall for each merchant (see “Set Diagrams” section), but if time or materials are running short, some merchants may spread their wares out on a blanket, or each merchant may be located in a separate Sunday school room. The “bustling marketplace” effect is changed somewhat, but it eliminates the need to build stalls if that isn’t possible. Diagrams for the city gate and synagogue are also included.

Lighting — Your normal lighting will be sufficient. The only time special lighting really enhances a scene is in the stable (Scene 14), where dim lighting with a spot on the manger would add to the drama.

Decor — Each character will be responsible for decorating his/her stall with the necessary props. Instructions are given at the beginning of each script. Time permitting, make signs with the merchant’s trade and put on the stalls. Ask to borrow card tables from within your congregation for the merchants to set their wares on. Be sure to cover them with burlap or some other “older” looking material. Remember to disguise anything that makes the room look too contemporary. Burlap works well, as does cardboard with scenery painted on it. Potted palms add a nice authentic touch. If not available, make them out of papier mâché. Strategically placed rocks and plants add visual interest. A mural is another option, with blue sky and the stone city walls painted on three of the sides, and some biblical era houses on the other wall. The possibilities are endless. You’ll be amazed and delighted at the transformation that takes place with a bit of ingenuity — it’s not as difficult as you might think!

SUGGESTED SET DESIGNS

BASIC PLAN:

Five set units will serve to create a Bethlehem environment for both the actor/performers and the guests. They are:

1. **City Gate** — A free-standing doorway placed at the entranceway to the church assembly room, church basement or auditorium where *The Bethlehem Experience* is staged.
2. **City Marketplace Profile** — A three-part "city-profile" set to create an overall feeling of the city and marketplace.
3. **Synagogue** — A background unit for the staging of the conversations between the Rabbi and students about the prophecies.
4. **Marketplace Stalls** — These may be improvised as needed using poles and tenting or fabric overhang.
5. **The Stable** — This also may be improvised according to the available space. The single necessary element is the manger.

CONSTRUCTION NEEDS:

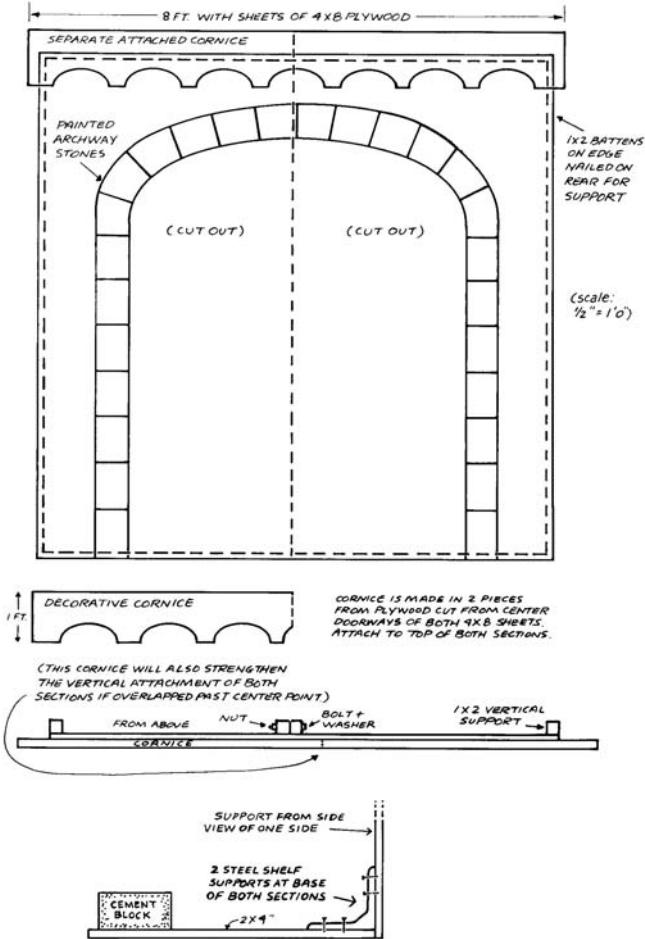
Any part-time or Sunday carpenter can build the sets described in these diagrams. They were designed for easy construction by James Hull Miller, the leading American stage designer of self-supporting scenery.

Materials and tools needed are as simple as 4'x8' panels of 1/4" plywood, a supply of 1"x2" supports, a saber saw, hammer and nails. After construction some paint, canvas and burlap will also be needed to finish the sets.

The set designs were developed using standard sizes. If your room space conditions will not permit these sizes, they may be proportionately reduced.

CITY GATE

SIMPLE ELEVATION-LAYOUT FOR 2 — 4'x8' SHEETS OF 1/4" PLYWOOD





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