SO LITTLE THEY KNEW

by Marion Fairman

CHRISTIANPUBLISHERS

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INTRODUCTION

The monologs are spoken by women not named in the infancy narratives of the gospels. Details are drawn from biblical materials, the history, politics, religious practices, and customs of the times. Each woman portrays her own reaction to the possibility that Mary's child is the Messiah. At the same time she suggests more than the personal; each woman reveals a modern attitude toward the birth of Jesus Christ.

CHARACTERS AND COSTUMES

A Gossip of Nazareth: A woman about fifty who feeds vicariously on the lives of others; one who savors every juicy tidbit. She thinks she knows everything, but she has no spiritual perception. She may wear a long dress of black or brown. Over it she ties a white apron. A long, dark scarf may be draped over her head and shoulders. She may pull it off her head in moments of excitement. Sandals would be best for her feet. Her hair should be pulled back severely from her face. Makeup should coarsen her features, but not make her look evil.

A Soldier's Wife: A pretty woman about thirty who is contradictory in nature. She appears to be shallow, but she yearns for more than she has experienced. She "knows" fighting is necessary to keep peace, but she shudders at the sight of blood. She "knows" you have to push people around, but she's saddened by the results. She may wear a girdled tunic of rose or green, trimmed with embroidery or lace. Over her tunic she drapes a large rectangle (the ***palla***) of a similar or darker color. Her hair may, in the manner of a young Roman woman, be waved in the front, the rest swept back, caught in a "cap" tied with a drawstring. The cap, which may be of the same material as her tunic or ***palla***, may be decorated. (See sketch) Earrings and jewelry. Sandals. Makeup should pay special attention to her eyes.

An Innkeeper's Wife: A plain woman about forty, sturdy and strong, with the hands of a hard worker. She is cynical about the Romans, the priests, the Jews themselves. She "knows" that while it is pleasant to think about a Messiah coming to save the Jews, it is prudent to put her trust in material possessions. She may wear a long dress of yellow or orange. A scarf of a similar or contrasting color may be draped over her shoulders to be pulled over her head at the exit. Sandals. Use ruddy makeup.

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A Wife of Herod: A woman about fifty with marks of suffering in her face. She knows the power of God to be unstoppable. But she also knows that evil in the person of Herod rampages unchecked. Thus, her despair. She may wear a long, flowing tunic dress of white or pastel color, trimmed with one or two strips of gold ribbon down the front. Instead of the ***palla***, however, let her wear a long black "Jewish" scarf across her shoulders to be pulled over her head at the exit. Sandals. Her hair may be arranged in the Roman style for older women: tight pin curls in front, braided hair or braided ribbons formed into a caplike shape in the back. If desired, a gold "pin" may be stuck through the braids, one that may be made by wrapping a letter opener with gold paper. Between front and back, a stiff-brimmed "hat" is placed, one that may be a tennis vizor covered with gold ribbon or paper. (See sketch) Her makeup should enhance the ravages of her suffering: pale, powdered skin, dark shadows under her eyes, round patches of rouge. Special attention to her eyes.

A Shepherd's Wife: A girl-woman in her late twenties, healthy and wholesome. She is a down-to-earth person, accustomed to caring for animals, babies, and mothers. She has no doubts about who the baby is nor about her response of faith. She is the only one who understands how little she knows. When evil comes, she does not turn away but calls for the holy light to sustain her. She may wear a blue short-sleeved shift, belted if desired with same material. Her hair may be drawn back and fastened with a piece of cloth. Allow some hair to curl around her face. She may be barefoot or wear hide sandals. Use blusher in her makeup.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Entrances and exits are suggested in the script to facilitate the passing of a cordless microphone from player to player. They may, of course, be changed by the director.

LIGHTING: If a sophisticated lighting system is available, work out compatible lighting for each monolog. For a simple production, use side floods, overhead floods, and spots. If no stage lighting is available, use general lighting, as bright as possible.

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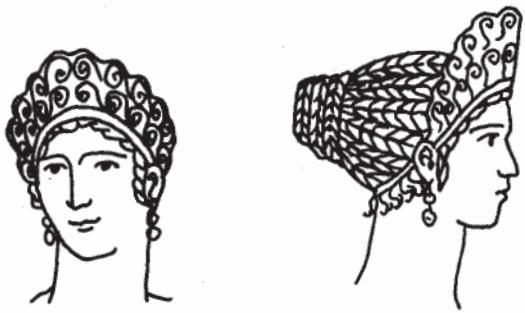
PRONUNCIATION of difficult words:

Ez-DRAY-lon (Esdraelon)
Ty-RO-pe-an (Tyropean)
POM-pee (Pompey)
CAR-mel (Carmel)
di-NAR-i-us (dinarius)
Id-u-ME-a (Idumea)
EE-do-mites (Edomites)
ES-senes (Essenes)
Jan-NAY-us (Jannaeus)
SAJ-ya-sees (Sadducees)
Mak-a-BEE-an (Maccabean)
A-ris-to-BU-lus (Aristobulus)
Mar-i-AM-ne (Mariamne)

PLAYING TIME: 55 minutes

SKETCHES FOR ROMAN HAIR ARRANGEMENTS

A Soldier's Wife



front *side*

A Wife of Herod

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A Gossip of Nazareth

(Enters Stage Right, hands on hips, shaking her head.) **Well! I declare!** *(Turns, looks through exit.)* **He *is* taking her along!** *(Indignantly)* **And look at Mary's mother, smiling . . . waving . . .** *(Tossing her head)* **She can't fool me!**

(To Downstage Right) **Up here in the hills, everyone knows everyone else's business! After all, there's only about a hundred of us, mostly farmers — some, like Joseph, craftsmen. Joseph's a carpenter; that's why he wears that wooden chip behind his ear.** *(Pause, points over audience toward Left)* **Away up there are the plains of Esdraelon where Barah and Gideon and Saul and the Maccabees battled Israel's enemies.** *(Points toward Right.)* **And there is the main road toward Nain and Jezreel — that's the way Mary and Joseph will go.**

(To Centerstage, confiding) **Her parents spoiled her rotten — that's the problem! Why her father let her ride on his ox while he plowed!** *(Indignantly)* **And her mother! Why, she let Mary sit in the fields all day braiding garlands of wildflowers! Her mother always said, "She'll never give us reason for shame!"** *(Tossing her head)* **Little did they know!**

(To Downstage Left) **Mary was always one to dream.** *(Reluctantly)* **A gentle girl. Even I — more than once — said to my girls, "Why can't you be more like Mary?"** *(Nodding)* **I thought she was almost perfect.** *(Short laugh)* **That's how little I knew!**

(To Centerstage) **When she turned twelve, the young men started showing off for her at the sheep shearings. Joseph, older than most of them and much too serious for such goings on, found ways to see her — bringing a taste of his mother's fig jam, mending a plow for her father, hoisting Mary's basket of olives to his own shoulder.** *(Pursing her lips)* **Mary's mother didn't like it.**

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(Sniffs.) **Oh no — she thought Mary was meant for more than bearing the children of a poor young carpenter!**

(To Downstage Left) **But Mary would invite him in to sit down, to eat a dish of dates, to have a sip of wine.** *(Sniffing)* **She took to making pillows for her father to rest on after his noonday meal —** *(Sniff)* **and nothing would do for filling but the cyprus shavings from Joseph's shop!**

(To Downstage Right) **One night when my daughter was visiting Mary, Joseph's father came to see Mary's father, carrying with him the marriage portion, the fifty dinars required by Jewish law. They sat on the pillows Mary had made, bargaining. But every time Mary's father looked toward the kitchen, he saw Mary, her hands clasped, her eyes beseeching.** *(Dryly)* **So, the arrangements didn't take long. When Joseph's father had gone, Mary hugged her father. He patted her head, sighed, and went to his bedroom where my daughter could hear Mary's mother — crying.**

(To Centerstage, pointing Stage Left) **Right up there is our synagogue — everything important happens there. That next Sabbath I was right behind Mary and her mother going into the women's gallery. Below us, Joseph stood between his father and Mary's father. After the men in their fringed prayer shawls chanted the psalms, the rabbi unlocked the holy chest and lifted out the sacred scrolls. Then —** *(Big breath)* **the rabbi announced that Joseph desired the hand of Mary whose lineage was also of the house of David. And that if anyone had cause to question this union to make the objection known.**

(To Downstage Right) **I looked sideways at Mary. Her eyes were fixed on Joseph, but she clutched her mother's arm. Her mother sighed and laid her hand on Mary's.** *(Knowingly)* **I knew Mary would get what she wanted!**

(To Downstage Left) **The next day, Mary's father**

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white-washed their house inside and out. Her mother started baking bread, washing vegetables, checking the wine. As the moon waxed full, Mary hung branches of dampened leaves on the wall and — *(Sniffing)* and even wove blossoms into the rushes of the ceiling!

***(To Downstage Right)* Well, on Wednesday of the week of the full moon, Mary's father flew a pennant from the roof of their house; her mother hung lanterns around the room, laid linen on the table, and placed two chairs at its head. In late afternoon, my girls went over to help Mary dress — and I ran over to get a good place. At sunset we heard men shouting; Mary's father lit a torch for the bridegroom. *(Short laugh)* Joseph didn't even look like a carpenter — he had bathed and dressed himself in white linen. *(Sniff)* Had his hair slicked down with olive oil.**

***(To Downstage Left)* My girls brought Mary to the door. Her white dress flowed round her ankles; her hair was unbound to show she was a virgin. *(Shaking her head)* Mary and Joseph stared at each other until my girls started to giggle. I glared at them, and they seated Mary and Joseph at the head of the table. I was first up to lay a bolt of cloth at their feet!**

***(To Centerstage)* Then — after the gifts *(Big breath)* the scribe nodded to Joseph. Joseph pulled the purse holding the marriage fee from his girdle. The scribe took it and said, "What token have you brought to mark this covenant?" Joseph unwound his girdle; the rabbi took it and laid it across Mary's uplifted hands. Joseph vowed he would honor her as a Jewish husband and that all of his property would be hers forever. *(Short laugh)* Not that he had any!**

***(To Downstage Left)* Then Joseph took from the rabbi a gossamer veil of white. His rough hands shook as he placed it on Mary's head. Now her face, her body, was his to shield. Then slowly he removed the veil and handed it to the rabbi to keep for the wedding.**

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(To Centerstage) **See — the betrothal made them man and wife before the world, linked by law — but not in the flesh! The wedding could be held up to a year later. One look at Joseph's face and I knew it wouldn't be that long!**

(To Downstage Right) **Well! For the next three months, all of us women helped Mary's mother make the bedding, the tablecloths . . . the towels . . .** *(Pause)* **Then, one day, when I went to their door, Mary's father met me and said there would be no sewing — Mary's mother had taken to her bed! When I asked to speak with Mary, he stammered that she was busy with her mother!**

(To Downstage Left) **I — I just happened to be looking out the door when Joseph came for his evening walk with Mary.** *(Slight pause)* **Betrothed couples can see each other alone.** *(Embarrassed)* **It's even legal — to — to kiss —** *(Hastily)* **— but it's not proper! When Mary's father turned him away, Joseph's face was white.** *(Rising tone)* **And neither Mary nor her mother set foot outside that house for over a month!**

(To Centerstage) **And then, all of a sudden, they bundled Mary up and packed her off to her cousin Elizabeth's — up toward Jerusalem.** *(Throwing arms wide)* **Well! What a mess Mary left behind! The men jibing at Joseph because his betrothed had taken herself off. Mary's mother and father not saying a word. And the whispering . . .** *(Shaking head)* **. . . terrible . . . terrible!**

(To Downstage Left) **About three months later, I was hanging out the wash. And there was Mary, riding in with a group of fisher folk from Magdala! When Mary slid off the donkey, I dropped a wet sheet right in the dirt! She was pregnant! More than seven or eight months if I'm any judge!**

(To Centerstage) **Well, that news spread fast! Joseph came and walked right into the house. A crowd gathered — whispers turned to mutters and muttering to shouts of**

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anger. Then, Mary's father stepped out, his face haggard. "Friends and neighbors," he said. The crowd quieted. "Our daughter," he stammered, "our daughter says that this child she bears is — is — is a holy child." The crowd stood there, stunned. He hurried on, "She says the Holy Spirit overshadowed her *(Stammering)* **and that — that — that the seed of Yahweh himself has entered her womb."**

(To Downstage Right) **No one said a word. Then Joseph came out, his face drawn. "Go home, friends," he said. "Go home." Everyone did go home. But they were whispering, "Whose child? Whose child is it?"** *(Pause, puzzled)* **I can't understand Mary's parents. If the child is Joseph's they could have had the wedding right away.** *(Shrugging)* **Some people might have gossiped, but no one would have known for sure.** *(Pause)* **Or, since she did go off to her cousin's, Joseph could have claimed desertion and divorced her.** *(Pause)* **But if the child is another man's —** *(Slowly)* **Mary should be stoned to death.**

(To Centerstage, fuming) **But that Joseph — Joseph chose — to believe her! Why? I'll never know. They've kept away from folks —** *(Indignant)* **— even from me, Mary's next door neighbor!** *(Gesturing toward Stage Right)* **And now,** *(Indignantly)* **there Joseph goes, taking her with him to Bethlehem for the census!**

(To Downstage Left, emphatically) **Those two actually think they are the chosen ones of God!** *(Bristling)* **I don't believe it for a moment. I'm not one to hear an angel speak.** *(Slight pause)* **I don't know about such things.** *(Emphatically)* **But I know what I know.** *(Slowly)* **To be pregnant, a woman must lie with a man!**

(Begins exit Stage Left, stops, turns Front; slowly) **If Joseph and Mary have been chosen to be parents of God's own son, all they've gotten so far is scorn and scandal.** *(Pause)* **I don't want to be any part of God's plan . . .** *(Emphatically)* **Not me! It costs too much!** *(Exit Stage Left)*

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A Soldier's Wife

(Enters Stage Left, shaking her head.) **That poor child — she can't be more than thirteen — fourteen at the most.** *(Looks out Stage Left.)* **It's a good thing she has a husband — in her condition, the soldiers would make jokes about her.**

(To Downstage Left, shrugging) **They have to be counted before they get through the gates into Bethlehem. My husband's that soldier riding the black and white stallion. He's a lieutenant — commands a platoon of thirty soldiers.** *(Pouting)* **It's all his fault I'm here in Bethlehem instead of in Jerusalem.** *(Emphatically)* **I liked it *there*. Our house was in the Tyropean Valley that runs through the city — a small house tucked under the arch — the arch that spans the valley — a passageway crossing from Herod's palace to the temple.**

(To Downstage Right) **What I really liked about Jerusalem was the upper market. It stands directly in front of the palace. It's wonderful — has Roman arcades along three sides and an open court for stalls in the center. All kinds of things to look at even when I can't afford them — oils and perfumes and silks and gold bracelets.** *(Big sigh)* **I love to shop!**

(To Centerstage, disgusted) **Then this place! It's only six miles from Jerusalem. But a different world! A few people living in mud houses. A dusty old square at the center of town —** *(Pouting)* **— not a thing worth buying. And a dirty old inn at the edge of the marketplace.** *(Looking around her)* **There are one or two houses like this one — whitewashed boxes!** *(Sighs.)* **It's not much, but it's the best there is.** *(Short laugh)* **I'm not even going to ask my husband how he got this house.** *(Laughs.)* **Probably threw out some Jewish tax collector!** *(Shrugs.)* **And that's all there is — except a few caves in those limestone hills.**

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(Sighs.) **I wonder where that poor girl will sleep tonight?**

(To Downstage Left) **It's strange how I feel I know her. You see, about five or six days ago, I went with a group of soldiers' wives to a town named Jezreel. They make this special kind of cloth — spun thin — like gossamer. The Jews use it at weddings. Well, I wanted some for a dress. We all took our maids, and we had a Roman rest house to stay in.** *(Indignant)* **Well, no sooner had I arrived when my husband sent word with a soldier that the centurion had transferred him to Bethlehem. He said the army was taking our Jerusalem house** *(Huffy)* **for a new officer from Rome!** *(Sighs.)* **I guess that's the lot of a soldier's wife.** *(Temper)* **But I don't have to like it!**

(To Downstage Right, nodding) **Believe me, I don't like traveling alone in this country either! I sent Dorcas — she's my Jewish maid — out to see if we could join a caravan going toward Bethlehem. She came running back, all excited. A small group of Jews in from Nazareth and Nain was camped outside of Jezreel. She said they'd be starting east across the Esdraelon plains in the morning. I hired a little cart, two donkeys, and a driver.** *(Sighs.)* **Not a comfortable way to travel!**

(To Downstage Left) **I didn't want to travel with Jews —** *(Disdain)* **— such peculiar people. But I didn't have much choice.** *(Tossing her head)* **I certainly didn't intend to talk to them — though I could have if I wanted to. Dorcas has been with me for seven years, and she and I speak Aramaic together.** *(Slight pause)* **I doubt if they wanted me with them either.** *(Short laugh)* **But they couldn't refuse to take a Roman soldier's wife!**

(To Centerstage) **Dorcas was so pleased we were going to live in Bethlehem.** *(Irritated)* **The silly girl prattled on about someone named Ruth whose tomb is here. And about Boaz, Ruth's husband, whose fields still carry his name.** *(Pause)* **The town is really special though because**

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— according to Dorcas — it's the birthplace of David, *(Exaggerating)* **Israel's beloved shepherd king.** *(Shaking her head)* **While she was telling me this, Dorcas got all starry-eyed. Bethlehem is the place, she said, where — according to one of their prophets — the Savior of Israel will be born.** *(Pause, uneasy)* **Talk like that — even from Dorcas — makes me nervous.**

(To Downstage Right) **But I couldn't help thinking of what Dorcas said when we joined the Jews that next morning.** *(Gesturing)* **Here was this Jewish girl — pregnant! Dorcas said her name was Mary — almost ready to deliver!** *(Laughing)* **But there was no halo around her head!** *(Ridiculing)* **When I first saw her husband, Joseph, he was strapping a tent across their donkey for a saddle.** *(Laughing)* **Some way for the mother of a Savior to ride!**

(To Downstage Left, shaking her head) **Wouldn't you know — as soon as those Jews saw I was Roman, they started to grumble — especially about the census. Dorcas said for Jews to be counted was to be seen as beasts — not human beings. To them, another insult from the Romans!** *(Short laugh)* **How easily they forget!** *(Indignant)* **The Jews themselves appealed to Pompey to settle their civil war! Yes, Romans are conquerors of Judea — but conquerors by invitation!**

(To Centerstage, shrugging) **Of course, as soon as Pompey's soldiers came in, the Jews changed their minds. My husband — only a boy then — said they fought for weeks before Jerusalem fell.** *(Sigh.)* **Believe me, Jews are hard to rule.** *(Bewildered)* **Why the mere sight of Roman guards carrying their standards can touch off a riot. Dorcas says it's because the emblems on top of the poles are graven images!** *(Laughing)* **Did you ever hear of anything so ridiculous?**

(To Downstage Right, indignantly) **They never see any good**

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things about us. Why, the very roads we traveled on were built by Romans. And Roman aqueducts from Caesarea bring them water from the Carmel hills! *(Sigh)* **We do everything we can to keep them happy. We don't make them worship Caesar Augustus — Jews are allowed to worship their own God. Why, they're even allowed to keep their high priests! I pointed that out to Dorcas.**

(To Downstage Left, ruefully) **But she pointed out to me that Romans keep the ceremonial garments locked up and dole them out to the priests only on religious holidays.** *(Sighing)* **There's simply no pleasing them.** *(Pause)* **It's the crucifying that horrifies the Jews. It's a terrible way to die. By law, no Roman can be crucified.** *(Falters.)* **But Romans don't mind crucifying Jews!** *(Slowly)* **One day in Jerusalem, I saw the soldiers whipping Jewish Zealots through the market. It made me a little sick. And when they crucified them and raised the crosses —***(Hands over ears)* **— such screaming! I ran home, fleeing from the blood and the sound and the vileness.** *(Shuddering)* **To this day, I dream of it.**

(To Centerstage, stiffening) **But, after all, that's the only way to keep the peace. Why, we're famous for the altar built in Rome to honor peace! Our kind of peace is known all over the Empire — the *Pax Romana*, so named by our savior of the world — Ceasar Augustus!**

(To Downstage Right, sighing) **By our second night on the road, I was weary. I wondered how that poor child could bear riding on the donkey. Dorcas said it was Mary and Jospeh's fourth day of traveling. While the sun was out, the east wind lashed grit in our faces and made us cringe in our clothes. But at night, by the door of each tent, each family built a fire. I was sitting beside ours while Dorcas cooked my supper. The moon had risen and was running before the clouds. We were camped in a grove of almond trees, and the night coolness had stirred**

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up the fragrance of the blossoms. That night the world — was — was far too beautiful — too peaceful — to dream of whips and crucifixions.

(To Downstage Left) **The girl and her husband sat down by their fire. She leaned her head against his shoulder, and the man put his arm around her. How I envied them!** *(Bitterly)* **My husband takes any girl he wants!** *(Pause)* **Obviously, the man loves his Mary and she loves her Joseph.** *(Pause)* **Can such love overcome hatred? Or will it take more than human love to heal all the stabs to the human heart?** *(Short laugh)* **I'm prattling on like Dorcas!**

(To Centerstage) **On the third day out of Jezreel, we crossed the river Jordan, rode through the valley and climbed again into Jerusalem, excitement growing among the Jews.** *(Disgusted)* **Nothing would do of course but they must go into the temple.** *(Pause)* **I was inside — once — to the court of the Gentiles — once was enough!** *(Distaste)* **The snub nose sheep pulling back, the lambs — meek — stiff-legged. The white doves fluttering in their cages.** *(Pause, slowly)* **And the hot blood spurting, the feathers sticky —** *(Shuddering)* **— the scraping and the hacking and the carving of raw, red meat.** *(Bursts out.)* **What kind of God demands blood sacrifice?**

(To Downstage Left, emphatically) **No thanks, I'll take our Roman god. Augustus Caesar, first emperor of Rome, demands that we fight to get what he wants and that we fight to keep it!** *(Nodding her head)* **My husband says that as a nation or as an individual — you get what you fight for in this world. If you don't fight, people walk all over you — any fool knows that! If you want to get ahead, you better start pushing!**

(To Stage Left exit, turns Front, falters) **I know he's right. You do have to step on a few toes and some people are going to get hurt.** *(Looks out exit, points.)* **Like those two —**

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look at them! They let everyone crowd in front of them — they still aren't through the gate! *(Pause, sighs, shakes her head; slowly)* **It's a hard world.** *(Exit Stage Left)*

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An Innkeeper's Wife

(Enters Stage Left, turns looks out, sighs.) **Well, there they go.** *(Uneasily)* **The sky flames scarlet — only a few minutes until darkness falls. I can still see the girl on the donkey.** *(Hand to mouth)* **Oh! The donkey stumbled — she'll fall!** *(Sigh of relief)* **Whew! Her husband caught her.** *(Shaking her head)* **They're both so tired they hardly know what they're doing.**

(To Downstage Left) **I did the best I could. I sold them some salted fish and some fresh bread.** *(Defensively)* **The man can find the caves of the shepherds. This time of year, the men are out with the flocks; the shepherd women will take them in — you can count on that. Not that anyone in their right mind would want to stay with shepherds and their stinking animals!**

(To Centerstage, expostulating) **What else could I do? All week long, people pouring in here with their camels — and their donkeys — and their chickens.** *(Shaking her head)* **Every group with a story about why I should take them in. Just look around my inn —** *(Indicating)* **— people packed everywhere, in the hallways, in the courtyard — even on the roof! This inn has always been owned by my father's family — he had no sons — and now it's mine!** *(Indignant)* **It's bulging with Roman soldiers kicking whatever or whoever gets in their way.** *(Modifying tone)* **Of course, the army does pay me a dinarius a night for each soldier. The man — Joseph he said his name was —is a carpenter from Nazareth; he saw it was no place for his wife. She needs women around her, not soldiers!**

(To Downstage Right) **You hardly ever see soldiers in Bethlehem — why should you — a village like this? But they're uneasy about the crowds.** *(Irritated)* **So — there they sit at the census tables — their helmets flashing — taking reports of each family's size and worth. And if they**

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don't believe what they hear, *(Gestures with thumb over right shoulder)* **that man on the black and white stallion knocks you down.** *(Indignant)* **Everyone in that line is a Jew. Here we are — God's chosen people —** *(Stuttering in anger)* **— and — and — and here's our land — both run by heathens!**

(To Downstage Left, shaking her head) **Oh, they're clever, these Romans! The first thing they did was to divide Palestine into five provinces.** *(Ticking off)* **Farthest to the north is Galilee — country folks live there** *(Gesturing to Right)* **like those two riding off. Then Samaria —** *(Disdain)* **— the less said about them the better. Then Judea — that's here, around Jerusalem.** *(Bragging)* **The center of everything.** *(Gesturing vaguely Right)* **East of here is Perea — then to the south, Idumea —** *(Making a face)* **— that's where the Idumeans and the Edomites live. The Samaritans and the Idumeans and the Edomites —all call themselves Jews.** *(Short laugh)* **And I'm glad to take their money!** *(Emphatically)* **But they're of no concern to us.** *(Uncertain)* **At least that's what the priests say.**

(To Centerstage) **The priests represent us before God in the temple at Jerusalem. Every day, each priest draws his duties by lot.** *(Shrugs.)* **Sometimes he performs the circumcisions; sometimes he collects the taxes — things like that.** *(Nodding)* **Important jobs. But not the most important. Once in a lifetime, it falls to a priest to burn incense in the Holy of Holies — where the ark of the covenant once rested.** *(Sighs, shakes her head.)* **But it's gone now, gone — destroyed along with the temple built by Solomon.**

(To Downstage Left) **The temple's been rebuilt twice — this last time by Herod —** *(Sniffs)* **— with our money of course.** *(Whispers loudly.)* **People say Herod's dying —***(Nods wisely)* **— calls the priests to the palace all the time.**

(To Centerstage, musing) **It's peculiar. The priests tell**

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us how wicked Herod is — but how they love to go to the palace! *(Disdain)* **Their food is served on delicate dishes — and then, first thing you know — they must buy some for themselves! They get a taste for fancy food at Herod's table; the first thing you know the priests are eating meat almost every night!** *(Short laugh)* **And drinking heated wine between courses — like Herod himself.** *(Angrily)* **Is it to pay for their fine china, their meat, their wine that my husband shovels the filth of animals — and I scrub — and sweep — and cook?** *(Bursts out)* **My, how well the servants of the Lord serve themselves with our tithes and offerings!**

(To Downstage Right, calmer) **Still, it's the priests who remind us we are Jews. They tell us the prophets have foreseen the day when the Jewish people will be delivered from pagan rulers.** *(Throwing out her hands)* **But no one knows how!** *(Waving her arms about)* **Why, bands of Jewish Zealots live all through these hills — plotting armed rebellion against the Romans.** *(Gesturing vaguely toward Right)* **But just a few hours away, in their desert monastery, holy men called Essenes fast and pray, waiting for a deliverer who will bring about an earthly paradise.** *(Short laugh)* **People who pay their bills would be paradise for an innkeeper's wife!**

(To Downstage Left) **The priests preach about Daniel's writings — and about a cosmic struggle —** *(Exasperated)* **— whatever that is! Sometimes they say Elijah will return to herald a time of peace.** *(Hands on hips)* **How is Elijah supposed to be born again?** *(Exasperated)* **That's the trouble with preachers — no one knows what they're talking about!**

(To Centerstage) **I'm not sure any Jew knows what he's talking about.** *(Ticking off on her fingers)* **Jews have been conquered by Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, uh — Greece, Egypt, Syria —** *(Pause, deep sigh)* **— and now Rome!**

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(Pause, nods her head, slowly) **Sometimes I think we like to suffer — like to lick our wounds. We beat our breasts at Roman scourgings — but we'd be lost without their whips! Who knows — maybe we're secretly glad the Romans kill our hopes of freedom.** *(Slowly)* **Too much might be required of free men.** *(Pause, sighs)* **At least, hating Romans gives some meaning to our senseless lives.**

(To Downstage Right) **Only one hope makes sense to me — the coming of our own ruler — our Messiah — promised so long ago. My inn was built long ago — back when David was alive. Yes it was! And David's part of the prophecy.** *(Short laugh)* **Maybe the Romans heard of it — maybe that's why the soldiers are here! Here in Bethlehem where they themselves forced David's descendants both men and women — to come!**

(To Centerstage, slowly) **The priests say the Messiah will come out of a woman. Not carved out of clay like Adam — not flung like a thunderbolt from the hand of God. No — no — he's to be a baby — he's to come from a virgin the prophets say — right here in Bethlehem!**

(To Downstage Right, struck with a sudden idea, stops, turns Front) **You don't suppose?** *(Hesitates.)* **You don't suppose it could be that —** *(Pause)* **— that girl who's about to have her baby?** *(Pause, short laugh)* **Not likely that she's a virgin — not with that husband hovering over her! Besides, they're peasants — no money — no property — no herds — nothing that's any good.** *(Short laugh)* **As we say around these parts — whoever heard of anything good coming out of Nazareth?**

(To Downstage Left, nodding head, briskly) **It's enough for that carpenter to know he must get his wife shelter, enough for him to keep her safe —** *(Nodding wisely)* **quite enough for him to provide a living for the woman and her child.** *(Pause as a thought strikes her)* **What would it be like for him to know he was responsible for the Messiah of**

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Israel — *(Slight pause)* — **for the Savior of the whole world!**

(To Downstage Right, turns Front, sighs) **Such nonsense! I don't know what's gotten into me tonight! The carpenter's wife is only an ordinary woman who will bear an ordinary child.** *(Shaking her head)* **Not the Messiah!** *(Musing)* **No, his parents, the parents of the Messiah, will be people of substance; their child will be someone who will put Bethlehem on the map!** *(Pause, briskly)* **Well, I better be getting back to work. I take care of my inn because my inn takes care of me.** *(Sighs.)* **I guess I'd like the Messiah to come — but in the meantime what a person owns is the most important thing in life.** *(Emphatically)* **That I know!**

(To exit, Stage Right, looks out) **Hmm. It's dark.** *(Pause)* **I wonder if Joseph found a place for his wife?** *(Shakes head.)* **It won't be long before she has her baby.** *(Pause, slowly)* **No, not long.** *(Exit Stage Right)*

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A Wife of Herod

(Enters Stage Right, looks back, mocking) **Look at those Persian kings — *(Mimicking)* — bowing and bowing to Herod and to each other!** *(Short laugh)* **If they know what's good for them, they'll get on their camels and get out of Jerusalem before Herod changes his mind and kills them right now!**

(To Downstage Right, emphatically) **Of course he is going to kill them. But first he wants proof that there really is a new king of the Jews. He'll let them find the boy king — if there is one. If not, then they're the fools, not him. Herod told the Persian kings to report back here to the palace. He says if there is a king he too will go to worship him.** *(Short laugh)* **When Herod finds out where the child is, he'll murder the kings — and then kill the boy!**

(To Downstage Left) **He half believes there is such a child. When the kings told him about the star they had followed, Herod turned pale. A few nights ago, his own astronomers pointed out a new star to him, the brightest one they had ever seen. So — while Herod entertained the kings of Persia with wild boar and lobster — Herod's priests searched the Jewish scriptures.** *(Laughing)* **And when they reported that a king from the line of David was to be born in Bethlehem, my dear husband —** *(Mocking)* **— Herod the Great — almost fainted!**

(To Centerstage, shrugging) **I don't know why he believes anything in the Jewish scriptures.** *(Disdain)* **He's not a Jew!** *(Indignantly)* **Why, he sent his own sons to school in Rome! Herod's an Idumean whose forefathers were forced into Judaism a century ago. But he calls himself a Jew when it suits him.** *(Laughter)* **No matter what Herod calls himself, the Jews call him a circumcized Arab!**

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(To Downstage Left, pause) **But as a child, Herod studied the Jewish religion — an embarrassment to him now, especially with the Romans.** *(Short laugh)* **Still — he's never really rooted Jewishness out of his soul and —** *(Hesitates, searching for the right word)* **— and — it — it — festers there as a kind of reproach to his life.**

(To Downstage Right) **The Jews are fond of reciting Herod's atrocities — he tortures and he kills —** *(Bitterly)* **— no one knows that better than I. But — he's kept the peace between the Pharisees and the high priests.** *(Short laugh)* **As much as anyone can! Some years ago, the Pharisees were feuding with a high priest who allied himself with the Sadducees. His name was Jannaeus —he was a monster — like Herod! He killed over fifty-six thousand Jews. Once, he crucified eight hundred Jews at one time. While they hung dying, he slaughtered their families in front of them!**

(To Downstage Left) **After Jannaeus died, his sons tore the country apart. Herod helped to end that civil war —** *(Short laugh)* **and he made sure Rome knew it! That should have been the end of the matter. But, about a year later, Julius Caesar was murdered. And while the Romans were preoccupied with that problem, Antigonus, son of the last Maccabean king, tried to restore the dynasty in Palestine. Civil war broke out again.** *(Contempt)* **Herod went running to Rome and persuaded the Romans to crown him king of the Jews.** *(Shaking her head)* **They did that — and killed Antigonus as well. After three years of shedding Jewish blood, Herod gained control, not only of Judea, but almost all of Palestine.**

(To Centerstage, short laugh) **Herod can't possibly live until a boy king grows up. But he won't let that stop him! Why, he'll have a spy on the kings' heels the moment they leave Jerusalem!** *(Short laugh)* **He's already alerted his palace guard. If the kings don't come back to the palace,**

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the soldiers will — *(Pause, falters)* — will slaughter all the male infants in Bethlehem.

(To Downstage Right, bursts out) **You think Herod won't do that? Why, after he was crowned, he killed off all the claimants to the Maccabean kingship, including his own brother-in-law, and the high priest, Aristobulus.** *(Pause)* **He took me, a Maccabean woman, for one of his wives — *(Bitterly)* — as a kind of political insurance. Soon after that he killed his favorite wife, Mariamne — and her mother — because he thought they were plotting to take his throne.** *(Pause, slowly)* **Just this last year, I saw him drown three of his sons — all because of — *(Bitterly)* — of rumors — rumors — that's all!** *(Bursts out)* **Oh yes, such a man could easily massacre the children of Bethlehem!**

(To Downstage Left, shaking head) **No wonder the Jews fear Herod!** *(Pause)* **But the Romans aren't afraid of him! They jerk Herod about like a puppet on strings! To please them, Herod builds Roman cities and markets — *(At random)* — gymnasiums — pagan temples — theaters — public baths. And games! The Romans love games. And Herod, before he sickened, was a great athlete. In Caesarea, Herod organized competitions like the Olympics — holds them every ten years — just like the Greeks.**

(To Centerstage) **Herod balances everything between the Jews and the Romans. When he rebuilt the Jewish temple — right next to it he restored the Antonia, a huge fortress! Then he broke through the stone walls of both buildings, cutting a door so the Roman soldiers could clatter down a staircase into the temple itself!** *(Nodding)* **Yes, Herod has mastered the art of walking a tightrope!**

(To Downstage Right, short laugh) **He knows the Romans wouldn't tolerate him if he didn't control the Jews.** *(Laughs.)* **For that matter, the Romans wouldn't put up with the Jews if Jews didn't control all the commerce.**

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