

THREE DREAMS AND A DANCE

A Play for Christmas by Jewell Ellen Smith

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TIME: When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the Roman year 747 (6 BC).

PLACE: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and a village named Hebron on a road leading towards Egypt.

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURES: Matthew 2:1-18; Luke 2:8-16, Numbers 24:17, 19, Isaiah 7:14-15; 9: 6-7; 40; 43:15; Micah 5:2.

PURPOSE: To tell the Christmas story.

THE CHARACTERS:

King Herod--Herod the Great, the ruthless tyrant who has ruled Judea some 30 years.

Hachaliah--*Hak-a-li-a* The king's cup bearer, a kinsman of Madam Hodesh, Elkinah, and Zalaph.

Esli and Melchi--The King's bodyguards.

Ja-rib--Minister and advisor to King Herod.

Madam Hodesh--Director of a troupe of Jerusalem dancers, a native of Hebron, and a kinswoman of Hachaliah, Elkanah, and Zalaph.

The Hodesh dancers--A company of professional dancers who perform frequently at the royal palace in Jerusalem, consisting of Zelzah, Keziah, Jecholiah, Hodiah, Izriah, Dellah, Tizrah, and Huldah.

The Wise Men from the East: Kaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

Jazarus and Mathtius, high priests

Shelemiah and Irijah--Scribes.

Three other scribes

El-ka-nah--a devout and learned rabbi, highly respected in Jerusalem.

Bethlehem shepherds: Nathan, Elihu, Ha-na-ni, two other shepherds.

Mary--the mother of the Christ Child.

Joseph--Mary's husband, a carpenter from Nazareth.

The Christ Child

The servants of the magi

First, Second, and Third Dream Angels

Death Angel

Roman army officers: first, second, and third centurions

Za-laph--a tent dweller of Hebron, the uncle of Madam Hodesh and cousin of Hachaliah.

Za-laph's wife

Total: 45 parts

Players required:

9 women dancers, 6 other women (angels, Mary, Zalaph's wife)

21 men (five scribes play shepherd roles)

2 boys (Magi's servants)

1 Newborn child

SCRIPT

ACT I Scene 1

Scene 1: Jerusalem, about 9 o'clock in the morning, in the throne room of King Herod's palace. Herod, garbed in his royal robes and carrying his crown in his hand, enters, accompanied by Esli and Melchi. Herod is suffering from a hangover and is in a bad mood.

HEROD: *pounding his forehead with his left hand* Oh, my aching head! *Walks on toward throne, stops, looks around for Hachaliah.* Where's Hachaliah? *Calls loudly* Hach-a-LI-ah! Where is that rascal?

ESLI: He's right outside, your highness. I saw him a minute ago. *Dusts off throne seat with his hand*

HEROD: Tell him to get in here! And bring some wine! *Groans* Oh, my head! *Esli turns to go get Hachaliah, meets him coming in. Melchi picks up three huge pillows stacked behind the throne chair but has to let them slide to the floor when Herod hands him the crown.*

HEROD: *to Melchi* Here, hold this thing. *Hands crown to Melchi, climbs slowly-- as would an old man--for he is 68--into throne chair.*

HACHALIAH: You called me, King Herod?

HEROD: I did. Don't just stand there! Get me some wine!

HACHALIAH: Yes, Sir. Right away, Sir. *Hurries out, returns almost immediately*

MELCHI: *Offering pillows.* King Herod, do you want to use any of your pillows this morning?

HEROD: Yeah, and get me my arm rest. My left elbow *flexes left arm* is as stiff as a camel's hind leg. I must be getting old.

ESLI: Oh no, king! You're not getting old! You just slept wrong, or something.

Guards adjust pillows for Herod's back and left arm.

HACHALIAH: *offering silver goblet of wine* Here's your wine, Sir.

HEROD: *starts to reach for wine, stops.* Did you taste it?

HACHALIAH: Oh, yes Sir!

HEROD: I didn't see you. Taste it again. I'm not going to get poisoned like my father before me!

Hachaliah takes a gulp, clears his throat, hands goblet to Herod. Herod takes a drink, spews this wine out of his mouth, throws the glass at Hachaliah.

HEROD: Damn you! You must'a made that this morning!

HACHALIAH: Oh, no Sir, King Herod! I-- I-- I'll get you some more!

HEROD: Hachaliah, haven't I told you a thousand times I like old wine and new dances?

HACHALIAH: Yes Sir, King Herod, you have. *Turns to leave*

HEROD: Go tell Madam Hodesh I want to see her dancers do some new dances! Right now!

HACHALIAH: *Surprised* The dancers? Now? Before ten o'clock in the morning?

HEROD: Hachaliah, would you like to see your own head rolling across the floor here? *Twirls hand over and over to show how H.'s head would roll like a ball.*

HACHALIAH: *With considerable uneasiness--though he has heard Herod's head-rolling-on-the-floor threat many times before--*Oh, no Sir, King Herod! No Sir!

HEROD: Then do as I say! Bring the wine! And bring the dancers!

Hachaliah darts away. Herod grumbles to his guards.

If I want to see dancers dance morning, noon, and night, I'll see dancers dance morning, noon, and night!

ESLI: Yes, King Herod. Of course.

MELCHI: You're right, Sir!

HEROD: Gim'me that wretched crown.

As Herod leans forward to take the crown from Melchi, Eli eases another pillow to his back. Herod plops the crown on his head at an angle, slumps back against his pillows.

I can tell, this is gonna be one of those days I wish I'd never been born.

ESLI: *trying to flatter Herod into a better mood.* Oh, Sir, don't say that. You're the king!

MELCHI: You're Herod the Great! The people call you Herod the Great!

HEROD: Tell me, now, what do the people say about me?

MELCHI: Why-- uh-- uh-- they say you've done wonders for Judea. Built cities throughout the land! *Looks to Esli for help in flattering Herod.*

ESLI: And palaces! You've adorned Jerusalem! The-- The-- The theatre! The amphitheater! Viaducts! Monuments! And-- And--

MELCHI: The temple! The beautiful temple! The people call it Herod's temple.

ESLI: Of a truth, Sir, you are Herod the Great!

HEROD: *much pleased at all the flattery* Yes. I am. I'm HEROD THE GREAT!

Curtain

End of Scene 1

Scene 2

Scene 2. A few minutes later, in the combination rehearsal room and sleeping quarters of the Hodesh Dancers. Madam Hodesh and her dancers are just waking up and getting up. Some are still asleep; one or two are yawning and stretching. Madam Hodesh is doing sitting-up exercises. Hachaliah knocks on the door.

MADAM HODESH: *calling out* Who is it? *Aside to dancers* I don't know who could be here at this hour of the morning! *Goes to open door*

HACHALIAH: *still outside* It's me, Cousin Hodesh! Hachaliah.

M. HODESH: *opening the door half way* Hak! What on earth are you doing here?

HACHALIAH: It's King Herod! He wants your dancers to come dance for him--right now.

M. HODESH: Now? King Herod must be out of his mind!

HACHALIAH: You may be right, Cousin Hodesh, but please come! Quick as you can. The king's in a bad mood. He threatened to have my head rolling across the floor!

M. HODESH: *laughing* I bet I can tell you exactly what he said! He said, "Hachaliah, would you like to see your own head rolling across the floor?" *imitates the hand gesture Herod uses with this saying.*

HACHALIAH: *with surprise* How'd you know?

M. HODESH: I know old King Herod! He's always telling me that my head's going to roll. He says that to everybody.

HACHALIAH: The only problem is he does make heads roll!

M. HODESH: Yes. Remember when he had his favorite wife Miriamne executed? Oh, that was horrible!

HACHALIAH: And her mother! And then he had the high priest drowned!

M. HODESH: Oh, yes! And two of his own sons strangled! It's no wonder people hate him and fear him!

HACHALIAH: *changing subject* Then you will bring the dancers? Right away?

M. HODESH: I guess I'll have to. It'll take about five minutes, though, to get them woken up and into their outfits.

HACHALIAH: *much relieved* Thank you, Cousin Hodesh! I'll tell the king you're on your way. *Leaves*

M. HODESH: *as she closes door behind H.* Wake up, girls! Get up! We've got to go dance for the king!

ZELZAH: *rubbing her eyes* Dance for the king?

DELLAH: Not again! *Stretches, yawns.*

TIRZAH: Madam Hodesh, we danced for King Herod till two o'clock this morning!

M. HODESH: Yes, I know, I know. But we've got to dance again, right away!

ZELZAH: What about our breakfast?

Hachaliah knocks again. Hodesh opens door.

M. HODESH: *with surprise* Cousin Hak?

HACHALIAH: I Forgot to tell you--King Herod wants some new dances! *Leaves*

M. HODESH: *throws up her hands, thoroughly disgusted* New dances! In five minutes I'm supposed to come up with new dances! *Mutters under her breath* Herod is an old fool! *Turns to dancers* Hurry up, girls. We'll have to try to put together some sort of a new routine.

Walks from couch to couch, shaking the shoulders of dancers who are still asleep.

Ke-zi-ah, wake up and put on your costume.

KEZIAH: *sitting up suddenly* Costume?

ZELZAH: We've got to dance. King Herod sent for us. *Looks about for shoes, gets down on knees to look under a couch* Has anybody seen my sandals?

Madam Hodesh reaches Huldah and Isriah, shakes both.

M. HODESH: Huldah, get up! You too, Isriah! No fooling around, now.

DELLAH: *to Zelzah* Zelzah, here's one of 'em. *Tosses a sandal to Zelzah*

TIRZAH: *to Zelzah* That's my shoe! Not Zelzah's! *goes to retrieve sandal* Zelzah, your shoes are over there by the door. *Points to sandals*

Zelzah slips on dancing shoes, goes to Madam Hodesh as she begins to pace back and forth.

ZELZAH: Madam Hodesh?

M. HODESH: Don't bother me right now, Zelzah. I've got to think about what routines or modifications of routines I can teach you girls. *Circles about, going through a few steps--as if planning a dance--repeats some steps.*

IZRIAH: *whining as she leans back on couch* Madam Hodesh, I can't dance. I've got two blisters from last night! *Pokes foot high in the air to show blistered toes* See?

M. HODESH: *without even looking at Isriah* Never mind a few blisters. *To herself* H-mm-mm. Let me see. I think I've got something figured out. I won't bother with rehearsing.

ZELZAH: Madam Hodesh?

M. HODESH: *ignoring Zelzah and walking in a circle--still talking to herself* I'll have them circle twice, swerve to the right, go into the Alpha and Omega figures, and then--

ZELZAH: Madam Hodesh?

M. HODESH: *a bit impatient* What is it, Zelzah?

ZELZAH: *enthusiastically* If the king wants to see a new dance, I could do my new solo! I know it! Every step of it! *Waits for answer* Please!

M. HODESH: Well-- I don't know. I'll have to think about that.

ZELZAH: Please! I know King Herod will like it! Especially the part that has the little short, tricky steps! *Dances about, showing fancy steps*

M. HODESH: You innocent child! I shouldn't tell you this, but when dancers perform before King Herod, he does not watch the way they move their feet!

Madam Hodesh claps her hands--a signal for the troupe to gather round her for instructions All right, girls. I know it's early. You haven't had your breakfast. You're tired from dancing last night. So am I. But we've got to perform again.

ALL DANCERS: *grumbling* Ah, must we?

M. HODESH: It is not wise to displease the king. So, get your costumes and let's go. *Pauses* Girls, I tell you what: do a good job this morning, and I'll take you on a vacation!

Dancers are surprised, jubilant; all start talking at the same time.

Zelzah: That'll be great!

Hodiah: When?

Tirzah: Where'll we go?

Huldah: Madam Hodesh! When do we leave?

Jecholiah: A vacation. Oh, goodie!

Keziah: I can't wait!

Izriah: That'll be wonderful!

Dellah: Think of it! A real vacation!

M. HODESH: I'll take you down to the old village of Hebron--that's where I was born. I have an old Uncle Zalaph living there, and we can stay with him. He and his wife still live in a tent.

ZELZAH: Sleeping in a tent will be fun!

M. HODESH: We'll go see the famous Cave of Machpelah. But mainly, we'll just rest our bones.

IZRIAH: Madam Hodesh, where is Hebron?

M. HODESH: Well, I don't know exactly how to tell you. But if you were going down to Egypt, you'd pass through Hebron. It's on the old road--to the south, of course.

Oh, it's an ancient place. As I said, the Cave of Machpelah is there and that's where our great Father Abraham is buried, and his wife, the beautiful Sarah. And Isaac and Jacob, and their wives.

DELLAH: Madam Hodesh, how do you know about all these things?

M. HODESH: When I was just a little girl, my Cousin Elkanah used to read to me out of the Books of Moses and all the prophets, and he told me all the history of our Jewish people.

KEZIAH: Madam Hodesh, I was just thinking. What if King Herod calls for us to dance while we're down at Hebron?

M. HODESH: I'll tell Hachaliah to engage some other dancers. We're not the only professional dancers in Jerusalem. We're the best! But there are other troupes.

ALL DANCERS: *in happy carefree mood* Yeah! We're the best!

M. HODESH: Let's go. *Starts out door, girls follow*
ZELZAH: *eagerly* Are you going to let me do my dance?
M. HODESH: Yes, you can do it.
ZELZAH: *clapping her hands* Oh, goodie!

All exit
End of Scene 2

Scene 3

Scene 3: A few minutes later, in King Herod's throne room. The king is still seated on the throne, nursing his headache. His bodyguards are at the door. Jarib is there to read a long list of people waiting for an audience with the king. Hachaliah has not yet returned with the wine.

JARIB: *tablet in hand* If it please the king, I'll read to you the list of people waiting out there to see you. *Gestures toward door*

HEROD: *grumbling* I'm not going to see anybody unless I can get rid of this headache. But you can read 'em. *Yelling out* Hach-a-LI-ah! That idiot cup-bearer has been gone an hour!

JARIB: *in soothing tone* He'll be here any minute, Your Majesty. He went to the wine cellar to personally select you some real good wine.

HEROD: It had better be good.

JARIB: *looking at tablet* Sir, there's a delegation of merchants from Jericho. They beg you to do something about the bands of thieves and cutthroats hiding between Jerusalem and Jericho. The merchants say they lose more goods than they sell.

HEROD: Tell 'em to come back tomorrow.

JARIB: *looking at tablet notes* The masons and carpenters who keep up the city walls want to talk to you about repairs. Especially, about what poor condition the Sheep Gate is in. And, they say that the tower of Me-ah--the one right close to the Sheep Gate--is about to collapse.

HEROD: *shifting his position in the throne chair slightly* Tell 'em to go fix the wretched Sheep Gate and all the other gates and all the towers and don't bother me with it!

Hachaliah hurries in, carrying the wine. Madam Hodesh and her dancers are right behind him, but they stop at the entrance. Hachaliah goes straight to the king.

HACHALIA: *after taking a generous taste* King Herod, here's you some real good wine.

Jarib eases his way out

HEROD: *takes a sip* That's better. Where're the dancers?

HACHALIA: They're out there. *Gestures toward door* They're ready to dance.

HEROD: Bring 'em in. *gulps more wine*

Hachaliah goes to the door, beckons to Madam Hodesh and the dancers to come in. Madam Hodesh leads the troupe in. They form a semi-circle in front of the throne, bow, murmur "Oh, King, live forever!" and move to the side. Madam Hodesh moves forward.

M. HODESH: *to Herod* To honor the king, the youngest Hodesh dancer--little Zelzah--would like to do a special new dance for you.

HEROD: *mildly interested* Little Zelzah, you say. Now which one is Zelzah?

Zelzah steps toward king, bows

ZELZAH: *as if scared half to death* It's-- It's-- It's me, Your Majesty!

HEROD: *pleasantly* Dance away! *Gives a sweep of the hand, guzzles more wine.*

Zelzah begins dancing. Other dancers clap their hands and shake their tambourines. (Flutes, a zither, or other instruments may be used.) Herod watches with apparent interest. But before the dance is finished, Jarib rushes in and interrupts.

JARIB: *brusquely* King Herod!

HEROD: Now what?

JARIB: Sir, there are three foreigners out here I think you'd better see!

HEROD: Foreigners? Where from?

JARIB: I don't know, for sure. You remember two days ago a runner came in from your agents on the eastern border and said there was a caravan of strange travelers headed toward Jerusalem?

HEROD: Yeah, I remember. So now they've arrived. So what?

JARIB: Your Majesty, they're not ordinary people. They look rich, and very dignified, and-- and-- Well, to tell you the truth, they look like three kings!

HEROD: Kings? Hmm-mm. They could be spies... *pauses* Did they state their business? Say why they're in Jerusalem?

JARIB: No, Your Majesty. All I could get out of them was they have been following a star--of all things--and they have a question to ask.

HEROD: Question?

JARIB: "The question," they said, "is only for the ears of the king." Those were their exact words.

HEROD: Show 'em in. *turns to dancers* Madam Hodesh, you and your dancers go. *Waves them out with a flutter of the hand* I'll call for you another time. *Finishes wine, hands glass to Hachaliah*

Madam Hodesh and dancers bow and back their way toward the side door. Madam Hodesh motions for the dancers to go ahead; she slips behind a curtain to eavesdrop.

HEROD: *to Hachaliah* Hachaliah, go see what you can find out about these suspicious looking foreigners. Talk to their camel drivers. Bribe their servants. *Unties money sack at his waist, hands coins to Hachaliah.*

HACHALIAH: Yes, Sir. *Hurries toward side door; discovers Madam Hodesh. She motions for him to be quiet.*

M. HODESH: I want to see what happens!

JARIB: *leading magi in front of throne* Your Majesty, King Herod, I bring before you distinguished strangers! *Backs away*

Magi bow low

KASPAR: I am Kaspar.

MELCHIOR: I am Melchior.

BALTHASAR: I am Balthasar.

HEROD: *all charm and politeness* You honor me and all Jerusalem with your presence. Have you traveled far?

KASPAR: Yes, King Herod, we've come far. From the East, from the "Land between the rivers."

BALTHASAR: We are searching for a certain king.

HEROD: Ah, you yourselves have the bearing and the appearance of kings! Could it be that you are Orient kings?

KASPAR: Your majesty, you flatter us. We are humble advisors to our kings. We are magi--keepers of sacred things, and servants of God.

BALTHASAR: Too, we are philosophers, prophets. We study the stars.

MELCHIOR: Some call us astrologers. Stargazers.

HEROD: What brings you here?

KASPAR: It is the stars--or, I should say one star, a new star--that brought us to this land of Judea.

HEROD: A new star? A search for a certain king? And my attendant says you have a question to put to me. Honorable Magi, you have me completely mystified! Please explain.

KASPAR: The question is this: "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and are come to worship him!"

HEROD: *so upset that he trembles with suppressed rage* The-- The King-- Born-- Born king of the Jews? Why-- I-- I-- I am king of the Jews!

I wasn't born king. I'm-- I'm an Indumaeon by birth, but I've ruled here more than thirty years--with Rome's blessing! Why, Julius Caesar himself gave me my first appointment! And Caesar Augustus is my friend! There must be some mistake!

KASPAR: Ah, King Herod, do not be troubled! Our search hast to do with the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy.

HEROD: Prophecy?

KASPAR: We think the prophecy is recorded in the sacred writings of the Jews.

BALTHASAR: We felt sure your scribes and priests could determine from these prophecies where this infant king has appeared. We're most anxious to find him!

MELCHIOR: We had no difficulty following the Child King's star until we neared Jerusalem. Then dark night clouds and dust stirred by the desert winds completely hid it. We've not seen the guiding star in three nights!

Herod, now composed, climbs down from his throne and turns on the charm.

HEROD: *pleasantly* Ah, that hot desert wind! We call it by its Arabic name, "sharug." 'Tis an evil east wind. Travelers dread it.

Now, as for this ancient prophecy you mention, I'm sure my chief priests and the scribes can find it. I'll send a runner to the temple, right away, and have them bring the sacred writings here to this room. I'll order them to search every scroll of holy writ! Why, before the sun goes down we'll have the answer for you!

KASPAR: *pleased* Thank you very much. That will surely help us.

HEROD: Sirs, you must be weary from your long journey. Be guests here in the palace. Rest and refresh yourselves. You and your servants. Tell your drivers to feed your animals with mine, and let them rest too.

KASPAR: You are most gracious.

HEROD: *turning to Jarib* Jarib, show these learned, holy men from the East to our guest chambers. And order my personal servants to see to their comfort.

JARIB: Yes, Your Majesty.

Magi bow and follow Jarib out. The minute they are out of sight, Herod goes into a rage, stomping back and forth, waving his hands in the air, and shouting. Both guards leave the door and come to Herod.

HEROD: So! These spies want to know WHERE IS HE WHO IS BORN KING OF THE JEWS!

It's a conspiracy! That's what it is! A conspiracy! They say they are magi, following a star! A star, indeed! *To Mali and Melchi* Send for the chief priests! Send for the scribes! Go over to the temple and tell 'em I want every last book brought here! The books of Moses! The books of the prophets! The books of wisdom! The psalms! Every last line the Jews hold sacred!

ESLI: *with some hesitancy* Sir, you want me and Melchi to go to the temple and get the priests and the scribes?

Madam Hodesh pokes her head out. Audience sees her. Herod doesn't.

HEROD: Of course! I'm not talking to the wall, am I? You're the only people in here. Where's Hachaliah? Get him in here!

ESLI: Sir, you sent Hachaliah to--

HEROD: Never mind where I sent him! Go tell Hachaliah to find me an astrologer! No, on second thought I'll go find an astrologer myself. You guards stay here and lock the doors. I don't want anybody going in or out of here for the rest of the day! *Storms out*

ESLI: Wow! Is he ever mad!

Herod pokes his head back in the door.

HEROD: *loudly* One of you lazy louts go get those scribes and priests and tell 'em I said find that prophecy, OR ELSE! *Leaves*

ESLI: Yes, Sir!... Whew!

MELCHI: There's no telling what that man may do!

Madam Hodesh slips out from her hiding place.

M. HODESH: *shaking her finger and whispering* Sh-hh! Let me out before you lock the door!

ESLI: *much surprised* Madam Hodesh!

MELCHI: Ma'am, where'd you come from?

M. HODESH: It's not where I came from, it's where I'm going to that counts! I'm going to get somebody who knows the sacred writings--better than all the priests and the scribes!

Madam Hodesh hurries past guards; they also exit

End of Scene 3

Scene 4

Scene 4. Mid-afternoon that same day, in the throne room. A table has been set up near Herod's throne, and the priests and scribes are gathered around it, poring over scroll after scroll of the sacred writings. There is an air of uneasiness, almost despair, among them.

Kali and Melchi are guarding the door. Jarib is over in the corner, talking to the priests Mathtias and Jazarus. Herod is conspicuous by his absence.

JARIB: *to Jazarus and Mathtias* Confidentially, I've never seen King Herod so upset before. He thinks these magi are part of a plot to overthrow his kingdom.

MATHTIAS: Is it true he's ordered Roman troops to guard the palace?

JARIB: Oh yes--day and night.

JAZARUS: I'm afraid he's going to be furious with us about this prophecy in the sacred writings.

JARIB: But I thought you told me several of the scribes had found references to the coming of a king who will save Israel.

MATHTIAS: They have. They've found half a dozen that we understand. But the king won't know what they mean.

JAZARUS: Shel-e-mi-ah, here *points to scribe at end of table* has even found a star prophecy that fits what the magi say. But I doubt that King Herod will think much of it. I don't know what we're going to tell him.

JARIB: Read him what you've found. That's all you can do.

Hachaliah comes to announce King Herod.

HACHALIAH: *loudly* Herod the Great, King of all Judea, is here!

Scribes scramble to their feet, and all bow. They stand until Herod is seated on his throne, then sit back down and pick up their scrolls. Jazarus and Mathias remain standing.

HEROD: Well? You've been sitting here six hours! Have you found out where this child "born King of the Jews" is to be, or has been born?

JAZARUS: *hesitating* Uh-- Yes, and no, Your Highness. We've located numerous wonderful passages! One even mentions the star the magi talked about.

HEROD: Read it.

JAZARUS: Shelemiah. *Gestures for Shelemiah to read*

SHELEMIAH: If it please the king, I would like to explain that this is the ancient prophet Ba-laam speaking to one King Ba-lak. Balaam says: *reads*

"I shall see Him, but not now.
I shall behold Him, but not nigh.
There shall come a Star out of Jacob,
And a Scepter *or a great king*
Shall rise out of Israel."

Shelemiah sits back down

HEROD: And just where does Balaam say this great king shall rise out of Israel?

SHELEMIAH: *jumping back up* I'm afraid Balaam's prophecy doesn't say where it will be.

HEROD: It's no good then!

Shelemiah takes a long audible breath and sits back down.

JAZARUS: Your Highness, I-ri-jah found in the writings of Isaiah a sign concerning a king our nation will have one day. It even tells what his name is to be.

HEROD: Now we're getting somewhere. Let's hear it, Irijah.

IRIJAH: *standing, reads*

"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign;
Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,
And you shall call his name 'Immanuel.'"

Pauses, resumes normal tone

Sir, if it please the king, the meaning of Immanuel is "God with us."

HEROD: *pounding the arm of his chair* I am not interested in God being with us!
And I wouldn't give two shekels for all the virgins in Judea!

I want to know where this child is! Either you will find out where he is, or
YOU'LL SEE YOUR OWN HEADS ROLLING ACROSS THE FLOOR!

A murmur of dread comes from the scribes and priests as Herod leans back on his pillows, muttering to himself.

HEROD: *to himself* I don't know why I've been cursed with such imbeciles!

Hachaliah enters, hurries to Herod

HACHALIA: *with urgency* King, Madam Hodesh is at the door, and she says--

HEROD: *much annoyed* Madam Hodesh? You tell Madam Hodesh that this is no time for her dancers!

HACHALIAH: Sir, she's not here to talk about dancing. She's brought our cousin, an elderly blind man, and he--

HEROD: Hachaliah, are you out of your mind? I am not interested in yours and Madam Hodesh's blind cousin.

HACHALIAH: But, Sir, he's the great teacher Elkanah!

Wave of surprise and pleasure sweeps through scribes and priests at the mention of Elkanah's name. They murmur their delight at the prospect of seeing and hearing the renowned rabbi. Some say one thing, some another, quietly.

Shelemia: Ah, the venerable Elkanah!

Jazarus: He will know the prophecy!

Iriyah: Elkanah! Our most learned rabbi!

MATHIAS: Your Highness, if anybody can tell you what the ancient prophets foretold, it is Elkanah.

JAZARUS: True, Sir! The venerable Elkanah--though he has been blind for years--is the greatest teacher and scholar in Jerusalem. He can recite the writings of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Zechariah--all the Hebrew prophets--word for word!

HEROD: Bring him in. We'll hear what he has to say.

All turn to watch as Hachaliah ushers in Madam Hodesh and Elkanah. Madam Hodesh leads Elkanah to face Herod.

M. HODESH: *to Elkanah, after she has bowed* Cousin Elkanah, you're in front of the great Herod now, and the room is full of scribes and priests.

Elkanah bows, then lifts his head--proudly.

ELKANAH: King Herod, it's being said in the marketplace that you are troubled. That all Jerusalem is troubled. Because of three magi from the East.

HEROD: *rather surprised* Oh, no! I'm not troubled! Not really. But I didn't know the news of these magi had spread all over the city. Tell me, what are the people saying?

ELKANAH: It's being rumored that these wise men are searching for a certain newborn Babe--a Child born "King of the Jews." Is this true?

HEROD: That's what the magi said. What else is being said in the marketplace?

ELKANAH: There's talk about a star. The way it was told to me was that the magi saw the rising of the Infant King's star in the East and that they followed it to our land of Judea. Is there any truth in this rumor?

HEROD: Yes, they followed a star. *Leans forward* Now, Honorable Elkanah, what I need to know from you is what the ancient Jewish prophets prophesied, that is, where this infant king is to be found! You do know the writings of the prophets, don't you?

ELKANAH: Oh yes, King Herod. Years ago--in a dream--the LORD showed me how when I was old, my eyes would grow dim. So, I learned the sacred writings by heart! God speaks to us in dreams, King Herod.

HEROD: *getting impatient* Yes, yes, I know. And that's fine, very fine. But I've got no time for dreams. I've got to find out where this Child King is going to appear.

ELKANAH: No offense to you, King Herod, but for generations our people have looked for the coming of one who would save all Israel. We call him the Messiah. He will come as a child.

HEROD: You're sure?

ELKANAH: Quite sure. The prophet Isaiah said, and I quote:

As Elkanah recites the exquisite lines, all in the room listen, spellbound--even Herod

"... Unto us a child is born,
Unto us a son is given:
And the government shall be upon his shoulder;
And his name will be called Wonderful, Counselor,
The Mighty God, the Everlasting Father,
The Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
There shall be no end.
Upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom,
To order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice
From henceforth even forever.
The zeal of the LORD of Hosts will perform this."

There is a hush; then Herod starts speaking slowly, in a normal tone. But his talk becomes faster and faster and louder and louder as his extreme impatience returns.

HEROD: Honorable Elkanah, your quotation was eloquent. But it doesn't answer the question! WHERE, in the name of the LORD, is the child to be born? *Pounds fist on arm of chair*

ELKANAH: *as if taken back at Herod's fury* Where? Why 'tis the prophet Micah who tells us that! Shall I quote Micah?

HEROD: *sarcastically* I shall be eternally grateful, if you will...

ELKANAH: *quoting* "But thou, Beth-lehem Eph-ra-tah, *though* thou be little among the thousands of Judah, *yet* out of thee shall he come forth unto me *that is* to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth *have been* from of old, from everlasting."

ALL: *under their breath* Bethlehem!

HEROD: *loudly* Bethlehem! So that's where the Child is! That's all I need to know. You can all go. *Waves the group away as if anxious to get rid of them*

Priests and scribes, relieved to get away from Herod, talk excitedly among themselves as they pick up the scrolls and leave. Jazarus and Mathias go over to Elkanah to pay their respects as they all exit. Remarks that the audience should be able to hear, as they leave, are as follows:

Shelemiah: I should have known Micah's prophecy!

Irijah: Me, too. But I'd forgotten all about Micah.

Jazarus: Bethlehem, the City of David! Of course! *To Elkanah* Ah, Rabbi Elkanah, you saved the day for us!

MATHTIAS: *to Hodesh* Madam Hodesh, it's a blessing that you brought the honorable Elkanah! We could have been here till midnight!

Hachaliah runs to Hodesh, so that he can get to speak to Elkanah, just before they go out the door.

M. HODESH: Cousin Elkanah, here is Hachaliah. He wanted to speak to you.

ELKANAH: Ah, my son, you're the king's cup bearer?

HACHALIAH: Yes, Sir, I am. I run lots of errands, too. And--

HEROD: *calling loudly* Hachaliah, come here! You too, Jarib.

HACHALIAH: *to Elkanah* I'm sorry, Sir, I have to go!

Madam Hodesh leads Elkanah out. Hachaliah and Jarib hurry to stand before the king. Eli and Melchi keep their usual post at the door.

HEROD: *stepping down from his throne* Jarib, go get the magi. Tell them King Herod has asked for a private audience with them.

JARIB: Yes, Your Highness. *Bows and leaves*

HEROD: Hachaliah, I'm sending you to Bethlehem with the magi. You'll be their guide.

HACHALIAH: But, Sir, they don't need a guide to get from here down to Bethlehem! The road's plain as day!

HEROD: You simpleton. Of course they don't need a guide. But they don't know that. *Lowering his voice* I want you to watch 'em! Make a note of everything they do, everything they say, everyone they contact. Understand?

HACHALIAH: Oh, Yes Sir, I understand, all right.

HEROD: Now, go get some of my best wine--like that I had this morning--and serve it while I'm talking to 'em.

HACHALIAH: Yes, Sir. *Hurries out*

HEROD: *beckoning to guards* Come here! *Esli and Melchi hurry over* When these three foreigners come in, lock the door. Don't let anybody else in. And turn off your ears. My talk with them--whoever they are and whatever they're up to--is to be in strictest secrecy.

ESLI and MELCHI: Yes, Sir!

Jarib arrives with the magi.

JARIB: *announcing tone* King Herod, your distinguished guests from the East!

HEROD: *all smiles and charm* Ah, come in, Sirs! How gracious of you to grant me a bit of your time.

Magi bow

KASPAR: The pleasure is ours, King Herod.

MELCHIOR: Indeed it is.

BALTHASAR: We are honored.

HEROD: Here, have a seat. *Guides them to sit at table used by scribes; Herod also sits at table* I have good news for you, but first try some of our Judean wine.

And I want to talk to you about studying the stars. It must be fascinating!

BALTHASAR: We find it so. It is our life's work.

HEROD: This morning I decided that I would engage an astrologer to teach me the meaning of the stars!

KASPAR: You were saying that you have good news. Did your scribes find the ancient prophecy about the Child born King of the Jews?

HEROD: *enthusiastically* Yes, indeed! They found it just like that! *Snaps fingers* He is to be born in Bethlehem--a place also called "The City of David." It's some distance south of Jerusalem.

MELCHIOR: Ah, that is good news indeed!

BALTHASAR: Think of it! Our long search is almost ended!

HEROD: I'll furnish you a guide to Bethlehem. And may I make a suggestion, and, ask a favor?

KASPAR: *very pleasantly* Your suggestion is our command, King Herod. Doing a favor for you will be a pleasure!

HEROD: *earnestly* When you reach Bethlehem, search diligently until you find the young Child. And when you've found him, please come back to Jerusalem and tell me. For I, too, must pay him homage.

BALTHASAR: We'll be more than glad to come tell you!

KASPAR: You're kind to offer a guide to show us the way to this Bethlehem, but that won't be necessary. The sky is clear, now. So tonight will simply follow the star!

HEROD: Ah, that star! I want to ask you more about it. Just when did it first appear?

KASPAR: I would say about two years ago. *Glances at companions* Am I right?

MELCHIOR: *nodding head* About two years. First, it was dim. Then it grew brighter and brighter.

BALTHASAR: Yes, we watched it for several months. Then, it took us some time to buy camels and provisions for the journey, and we've been traveling since early spring.

KASPAR: *setting down wine glass and getting up* Come, let us be on our way to Bethlehem!

Magi rise. Herod also gets up.

HEROD: Now I'll be more than glad to send an expert guide with you. My cup bearer Hachaliah knows the road to Bethlehem like the palm of his hand!

KASPAR: No, no, King Herod. We'll follow the star. You have been more than generous with your time and hospitality. We thank you.

Magi bow, depart; Hachaliah begins gathering up glasses.

HEROD: *calling after the magi--pleasantly* Remember now, come and tell me when you've found the young king!

Herod whirls around, muttering, cursing and talking to himself.

HEROD: Damn it! Nobody is going to outwit me! Hachaliah, get yourself down to Bethlehem. Be there when they get there.

HACHALIAH: *much worried* But, King Herod, the magi will see me!

HEROD: Use what little brains you have! Disguise yourself!

HACHALIAH: Disguise myself?

HEROD: As a beggar, or a shepherd, or a juggler--anything! For all I care, you can borrow one of Madam Hodesh's costumes and be a Hodesh Dancer! Just get down to Bethlehem and watch every move these magi make.

HACHALIAH: *with resignation* Yes, Sir.

Herod strides off stage. Guards follow Herod.

HACHALIAH: *to himself* Things get worse by the day around here.

Walks out, head down

END OF ACT I

ACT II--Scene 1

Scene 1: That same afternoon, in Madam Hodesh's rehearsal room. Madam Hodesh is helping Hachaliah dress himself as a shepherd. Several of the dancers are assisting. Zelzah holds a shepherd's staff. Huldah has the cloak. Tizrah holds a lantern, which is not burning.

M. HODESH: *stepping back to admire the costume* Cousin Hak, I think you look exactly like a shepherd! *Takes cloak from Huldah and drapes in across H.'s shoulders*

TIZRAH: You sure do! *Holds lantern to H.*

ZELZAH: You look like a good shepherd searching for his lost sheep!

HACHALIAH: Well, I feel like the lost sheep!

M. HODESH: Here, *picks up sling from table* don't forget your sling. All shepherds carry a sling and a bag of rocks. *Hands items to H.*

ZELZAH: Here's your staff. *Hands staff to H.* Good luck!

Hachaliah starts toward door

M. HODESH: Hak, we won't be here when you get back. I'm taking the dancers down to Hebron--on a vacation trip. Have I already told you this? So much has happened today I can't remember half of what I've said!

HACHALIAH: No, you didn't mention it. How long are you going to stay?

M. HODESH: Not long. Just several days--till our bones get rested! We'll be staying with Uncle Zalaph, and he won't want a tent full of dancers very long!

HACHALIAH: Thanks for everything, Cousin Hodesh! *Leaves*

M. HODESH: *coming back from door* Well, girls, we've done our good deed for one day. Let's go eat supper. Then, get everything packed. We'll leave for Hebron, bright and early in the morning.

All exit

End of Scene 1 of ACT II

Scene 2

Scene 2: Soon after nightfall, that same day. On a road near Bethlehem. Hachaliah, garbed in his shepherd's costume, sees a band of shepherds ahead. They appear to be highly excited and in a hurry. Hachaliah runs to catch up with them.

HACHALIAH: *waving his lantern and calling out* Hello! Hello there, shepherds! Wait for me!

Shepherds stop, look around, wait for H. to catch up with them.

NATHAN: *in friendly tone* Hello, stranger! You look like a shepherd--like us.

HACHALIAH: *out of breath* Well-- Uh-- Uh-- I wear shepherd's clothes, all right. Are you going to Bethlehem?

NATHAN: *with joy and excitement* We sure are! Fast as we can!

E-LI-HU: Want to come with us? We're going to find a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger!

NATHAN: He's our Saviour, Christ the Lord! Born this very day!

HA-NA-NI: The angels said so!

HACHALIAH: What on earth are you men talking about?

ELIHU: Nathan, you tell him.

NATHAN: Not more than ten minutes ago we were out there in the fields, *waves arm* watching over our sheep like always, when all of a sudden a host of angels came floating down from heaven!

ELIHU: *interrupting* They nearly scared us to death!

HANANI: I thought I'd die!

NATHAN: It scared us, all right. But the angels said not to be afraid and they started talking and singing "Glory to God in the Highest and peace on earth--good will to men," and they said to go into Bethlehem for today our Saviour, Christ the Lord is born!

HACHALIAH: *wide-eyed and almost speechless* This is incredible! I can't believe it!

ELIHU: The angels said the good news is for all people, so come on and go with us!

HACHALIAH: *joyously* Oh, I will! I will! I'm looking for a newborn Babe, too! A child King! A King! It must be the same Child!

NATHAN: *putting his hand on Hachaliah's shoulder* Good! Let's go!
All move on, and off stage. Hachaliah talks on.

HACHALIAH: Now fellows, I'm not a real shepherd. I'm just dressed up... *voice trails off*

End of Scene 2 of ACT II

ACT II, Scene 3

Scene 3: That same night. In a stable near Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph sit near the manger, looking down with adoration at the Christ Child.

MARY: *quietly, as she smooths a fold of the swaddling bands wrapped about her newborn Babe* Look at him, Joseph. He sleeps so peacefully.

JOSEPH: *calmly* Very peacefully... *pauses* He is a beautiful child!

MARY: Yes, beautiful! *Pauses* Will you call his name JESUS?

JOSEPH: Yes. We shall call his name JESUS. There is no other name.

MARY: I know. I remember the words of the angel of the Lord. He said "Fear not, Mary; for thou has found favor with God. ...thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS."

JOSEPH: *still speaking quietly* Yes. *Short pause* The angel who came to me in a dream said the same thing: "Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins."

Joseph carefully presses down a bit of the straw in the manger. He gets up suddenly when he hears a noise and sees people coming with lanterns. The shepherds arrive. Joseph goes to the entrance of the stable to meet them. Nathan steps out from the group and goes to talk with Joseph.

NATHAN: *urgently, sincerely* Sir, we are Bethlehem shepherds from out in the fields. Tonight we're going from stable to stable, looking for a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. He's Christ the Lord!

JOSEPH: Yes, I know.

NATHAN: Do you know where he might be?

JOSEPH: *joyously, proudly* He is here! *Waves toward manger* Come and see Him! *Nathan walks slowly toward manger. Joseph invites the other shepherds to come.*

Come, all of you! Come see the Holy Child!

All shepherds and Hachaliah enter, look at the Child, and kneel in adoration--on left stage, near manger.

Magi arrive. Joseph goes to invite them in. Kaspar steps ahead of other magi.

KASPAR: Sir, we are magi--come from the East--to worship the One who is born King of the Jews. The star we followed is shining down on this stable. Could the infant king be here?

JOSEPH: Yes.

KASPAR: ...In this humble place?

JOSEPH: Yes, Tonight, the King you seek sleeps on a bed of straw. But the Lord our God has said that one day "he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end." Come and see him!

Magi follow Joseph to the side of the manger. The servant boys carrying their treasure chest linger behind.

JOSEPH: Here he is!

Magi gaze down at the child, bow, kneel down, and then rise slowly.

KASPAR: *to Joseph* May we give Him gifts?

JOSEPH: If you like.

Kaspar beckons to servant boys. They bring chest, ease themselves to the side. Kaspar opens the chest, lifts out bag.

KASPAR: *speaking slowly, to Joseph* I give Him gold! *Hands bag to Joseph, steps aside*

MELCHIOR: *taking frankincense from chest and handing it to Joseph* I offer frankincense.

BALTHASAR: *lifting out myrrh container and handing it to Joseph* I bring him myrrh.

Lights dim. Magi bow again and leave. Shepherds exit slowly. Joseph lays the gifts beside other bundles in the corner, picks up bedroll.

JOSEPH: Mary, you must sleep now. And rest. I'll make my bed here close to the Babe. *Starts spreading bedroll beside manger*

MARY: Yes, it is rather late. Yet I'm not anxious to sleep. All these things that have happened--I shall keep them, and ponder them in my heart. *Cf. Luke 2:19*

Mary goes to back of stable and lies down on improvised bed. Joseph goes to sleep on bedroll, close beside manger. Lights out.

End of Scene 3

ACT II, Scene 4

Scene 4: Later, that same night. Among the clouds outside Heaven's gate. Three Dream Angels and a Death Angel walk along together.

1ST DREAM ANGEL: *much concerned* Death Angel, I didn't know you planned to go down to Earth with us--to Bethlehem!

DEATH ANGEL: Oh, I'm not! I'm not going down to Earth for two or three days yet. And when I do go, I won't stop in Bethlehem. God is sending me to a city

called Jerusalem. *Walks on* I'll probably see you three when you get back.
disappears

2ND DREAM ANGEL: *to other two* We'd better get started.

3RD DREAM ANGEL: Yes, it must be past midnight, on Earth.

1ST ANGEL: I don't know about you two, but I rather like to speak to people in their dreams.

2ND ANGEL: Me too, that is, when I have something good to tell.

3RD ANGEL: Well, these warnings we're taking tonight could be worse!

Angels move to entrance of Stable in Bethlehem set, stop. Mary, Joseph, and the Babe are all asleep, as at the end of Scene 3.

1ST ANGEL: Which one of us is going to speak to Joseph?

2ND ANGEL: *to first* You warn him! Maybe you should wake him up so they can leave right away.

1ST ANGEL: All right. I'll tell him what God said, and wake him.

3RD ANGEL: We'll wait for you.

First Angel walks to Joseph, others wait at entrance.

1ST ANGEL: *looking down at J.* Joseph! *Stoops and taps his shoulder* Joseph! *Joseph stirs, mumbles in his sleep* Joseph! *Joseph sits up, remains asleep* Hear what I have to say, Joseph. God has sent me to warn you.

JOSEPH: *talking in his sleep, without looking at angel* Warn me? Warn me of what?

1ST ANGEL: *speaking slowly, distinctly, as if to a child* You must get up and take the Holy Babe and his mother, and flee into Egypt!

JOSEPH: *repeating, not asking question* Flee into Egypt.

1ST ANGEL: King Herod will try to destroy the Holy Child. He will search the land and try to kill him.

JOSEPH: *still asleep* Herod-- will try to kill-- *leaps to his feet, wide awake, greatly startled* Who-- What-- Uh-- Uh-- Who're you?

1ST ANGEL: God sent me to warn you to leave Bethlehem! Tonight! Take the Holy Child and his mother and go down to Egypt! Stay there till I bring you word!

Angel leaves swiftly. Joseph follows a step or two, then runs to Mary. All angels exit.

JOSEPH: *urgently* Mary! Wake up, Mary! *Gets her awake* We have to leave! Quickly!

MARY: Oh, Joseph! *Runs to manger; Joseph lifts up the Child*

JOSEPH: Here, take the Babe. *Hands child to Mary* And his gifts! *Grabs up pouch holding magi gifts, hands them to Mary*

Joseph quickly rolls their other belongings into the bedroll and hurries Mary and the Babe out.

End of Scene 4

ACT II, Scene 5

Scene 5: A few minutes later that same night. At a grassy spot just outside Bethlehem, where the magi and their servants have bedded down for the night. Kaspar, Melchior, Balthasar snore peacefully. The three Dream Angels enter, walk about among the sleepers, talking quietly.

1ST ANGEL: They look so happy. Balthasar is even smiling in his sleep.

2ND ANGEL: I suppose they are happy.

3RD ANGEL: Yes. They found their king!

1ST ANGEL: Shall we speak just to the magi, or shall we warn the servant boys, too?

2ND ANGEL: In God's eyes, servants are as important as masters.

3RD ANGEL: That's true.

One by one the angels bend down and speak to the magi.

1ST ANGEL: *to Kaspar* Kaspar, do not trust King Herod. He doesn't want to pay homage to the Holy Child. He wants to kill him!

2ND ANGEL: *to Melchior* Melchior, you and your companions must not go back to Jerusalem. Choose another road when you return to your country.

3RD ANGEL: *to Balthasar* Balthasar, do not tell Herod where you found the Infant King.

Angels gather near servant boys

1ST ANGEL: Little Servant Boys, when you wake in the morning, tell your masters that you dreamed of angels. Tell them three angels came and said, "Leave Bethlehem and take a secret way home." The evil king will try to kill the Babe to whom they gave the gold and frankincense and myrrh!

Angels leave. Lights dim, go out

END OF ACT II

ACT III Scene 1

Scene 1: A few days later, shortly after nightfall. At King Herod's palace. The king's attendant Jarib is urging him to retire for the night. Instead, Herod paces back and forth in front of his couch, fuming that Hachaliah has not returned from Bethlehem. Esli and Melchi stand guard at the bedroom door.

HEROD: Where is that Hachaliah? He should have been here yesterday!

JARIB: King Herod, Sir, why don't you go to bed and try to get some rest? You haven't slept for three nights!

HEROD: How can I sleep when there's a plot to take my throne from me? I should have sent you to Bethlehem to watch the magi.

JARIB: *offering glass of wine* Here, King, take a little wine and lie down.

HEROD: All right. *Takes glass, sits down on couch* I am about dead on my feet. *Gets up abruptly* Jarib, the Roman soldiers are still here, aren't they?

JARIB: *surprised that the king should ask* Oh, yes Sir! Three Centurions and their men are guarding the palace grounds twenty-four hours a day--just like you ordered.

HEROD: Good. *Sits back down*

Hachaliah comes through the door

ESLI: *calling to Herod* King Herod, here he is!

MELCHI: *to Hachaliah as he runs past* Hachaliah! What happened to you?

Hachaliah runs to Herod, bows low

HACHALIAH: *panting for breath* King Herod, I got here quick as I could!

Herod gets up slowly, begins speaking slowly and then speaks fast and loud

HEROD: Hachaliah, I don't know what kind of tale you've made up to tell, but it had better be good! Otherwise, YOU'RE GOING TO SEE YOUR OWN HEAD ROLLING ACROSS THE FLOOR!

HACHALIAH: Oh, King, I beg you to listen. I got back before sundown yesterday, but those Roman soldiers wouldn't let me in the gate. I tried to tell 'em I'm your cup bearer, but they just laughed and locked me up!

HEROD: *harsh, demanding tone* What happened in Bethlehem? Did the magi get there? Did they find that child? If they did, where is he? And where are they? And why haven't they come back to Jerusalem? Come on, speak up! Speak up! In a hurry!

HACHALIAH *talking fast* Yes, Sir. The magi got to Bethlehem, but I took a shortcut and got there first. I ran into a bunch of shepherds and they said angels from heaven had told them where to find the newborn Child. So I went with 'em, and we found Him--in a stable, asleep on some hay--just like the angels had said! We bowed ourselves down, for we could tell He was so-- so, uh-- Holy! That's what he was! Holy! And we hadn't been there three minutes when the magi got there. They bowed down too, and they gave Him presents! *Stops to catch breath*

HEROD: Hachaliah, I don't believe half of what you're telling! But go on.

HACHALIAH: Well, right soon the magi left and the shepherds too. I went with the shepherds, and--

HEROD: You went where with the shepherds?

HACHALIAH: To their sheep fold, out in the fields-- close to Bethlehem. You see, this time of the year they keep watch over their flocks by night.

HEROD: Oh, you blithering idiot! I send you to Bethlehem to watch three scheming magi from the East and you go down there and WATCH SHEEP!

HACHALIAH: Oh, but King, early next morning I went back into Bethlehem, and I went back to the place where the magi had camped. But they were gone. And nobody knew where they went!

HEROD: Next, you're going to tell me that then you went to the stable and the baby king was gone and nobody knew where he went!

HACHALIAH: Yes, Sir, that's what happened! I--

Herod grabs Hachaliah by the collar, shoves him toward Jarib.

HACHALIAH: *screaming* King, have mercy!

HEROD: Have him executed!

Jarib grabs Hachaliah, starts dragging him out; but when Herod's head is turned, he whispers to Hachaliah and lets him snatch away and run out the door. Eli and Melchi make a pretense of trying to stop him, but he gets away. Jarib and the guards run out the door but return immediately, without Hachaliah. They whisper among themselves. Herod, meanwhile, sits down on his couch, gulps some wine, and talks to himself.

HEROD: *to himself* Now it comes to me what to do! I'll do it! I'll do it! They said that star appeared in the East two years ago. So, my order will be two years old and younger! *Calling out Jarib?*

JARIB: Yes, Sir! *Hurries to Herod* What is it, Sir?

HEROD: Go get those Roman officers!

JARIB: Now?

HEROD: Right now.

JARIB: Yes, Sir. *Strides out*

HEROD: *to himself* Nobody, nobody, is going to take my kingdom! *Picks up crown* This is my crown! I've worn it thirty years! And I'll wear it till I die! *Puts on crown and sits down in throne chair to wait for Romans*

Jarib enters, bring three Roman Centurions. Centurions bow.

1ST CENTURION: King Herod, you wanted to see us?

HEROD: Yes. I have orders for you. *Steps down from chair and walks back and forth* Each of you commands one hundred soldiers--right?

1ST CENTURION: Yes, Your Highness, as Centurions, we are assigned 100 men. They are well trained.

HEROD: Take your three hundred soldiers, give each man a two-edged sword, go down to Bethlehem and kill every male child two years old and under!

Centurions, Jarib and guards all gasp in horror and disbelief.

1ST CENTURION: Kill every male child?

2ND C.: King Herod!

3RD C.: You can't mean it?

HEROD: Search every house, every tent. Go up and down every street, every road, from Bethlehem to our borders--in all directions. Don't leave one child alive. Is my order clear?

1ST CENTURION: *without emotion* Your order is clear.

Centurions bow, march out in step. Jarib follows them to the door. When he returns, Herod is taking off his crown and making preparations to go to bed.

JARIB: *with some hesitation* Sir, uh-- Will you go to bed now?

HEROD: *sitting down on couch and trying to unfasten his sandals* I might as well. *Holds out foot* Jarib, see if you can unfasten this damn shoe.

Jarib removes king's sandals, helps him into bed. Herod groans and closes his eyes. Jarib walks out quietly, beckons the guards to follow him. They close the door behind themselves. Lights go very low. Herod begins to snore. Death angel glides in. She looks down at Herod, walks around behind his couch, begins speaking to him.

DEATH ANGEL: Herod, King of Judea, of all men on earth this night, you are the most brutal. How could you order the massacre of the innocents! Because of you, the sad words spoken by Jeremiah the prophet will come true:

"In Rama was there a voice heard,
lamentation, and weeping,
and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children,
And would not be comforted,
Because they are not."

Angel walks about--a few steps--stops at the foot of the couch and speaks again.

King Herod, you will die. Soon. Not by poison, as did your father.

Not by execution, as you decreed for your wife Miriamne and her mother.

Not by drowning, as you ordered for your brother-in-law, the high priest.

Not by strangulation, as you arranged for two of your own sons.

Not even by the swift two-edged sword, just ordered for Bethlehem's little ones.

No, King Herod. God himself will decree how you shall die...

Death angel goes away.

End of Scene 1 of Act III

ACT III, Scene 2

Scene 2: The following evening, at dusk. In the tent of Zalaph, near Hebron. Madam Hodesh and her dancers, and Hachaliah, are the guests of Zalaph and his wife. They all sit on the tent floor, enjoying the evening meal and listening as Hachaliah tells of being in Bethlehem and of his escape from King Herod.

ZALAPH: *passing bread to Hachaliah* Here, my son, eat more! You've had quite a time of it.

HACHALIAH: Yes Sir, Cousin Zalaph. It was wonderful to get to see the Holy Child in Bethlehem. But I thought sure King Herod was going to kill me! He would have, if I hadn't run away.

M. HODESH: Hak, when the magi got to Bethlehem and found the Holy Child King, what did they say?

HACHALIAH: I can't remember exactly what they said, but they gave Him gifts. Fine gifts! Gold! And frankincense! And myrrh!

A murmur of amazement and approval sweeps through the group. Some say one thing, some another, all at the same time.

Madam Hodesh: My goodness! Those were gifts fit for a king!

Zalaph: Those were fine gifts!

Zalaph's Wife: Think of it--gold! And frankincense! And myrrh!

Zelzah: Marvelous!

Hodiah: The magi must be rich!

Tirzah: Imagine that! Such costly gifts!

Keziah: Gold! Oh my!

Izriah: Such gifts! Rich spices! And gold!

Huldah: I never heard of such presents!

Jecholiah: That was wonderful!

Dellah: Those were precious gifts! Real treasures!

M. HODESH: *after the exclamations have subsided* I wish we had all been there-- to see the Holy Child. But, perhaps it's just as well we weren't. We wouldn't have had any gifts to give Him.

ZELZAH: Madam Hodesh, we could have danced for Him!

Other dancers murmur their agreement with Zelzah

M. HODESH: I hadn't thought of that. But you're right. We could have danced for him. When you do what you can do best for someone, that's a present!

JOSEPH: *calling loudly from outside* Hello, in there! Is there room in your tent for strangers?

ZALAPH: *to Hachaliah* Son, you're quick on your feet. See who it is.

Hachaliah scrambles to his feet and goes to the tent entrance. Standing there are Joseph and Mary with the Christ Child.

JOSEPH: *to Hachaliah* May we come in, out of the night?

Hachaliah is so surprised that instead of answering, he runs back to Zalaph.

HACHALIAH: *waving his hands* It's-- It's-- It's the people with the Holy Child! From Bethlehem!

M. HODESH & ALL DANCERS: not in unison The Holy Child King!

Zalaph hurries to tent entrance

ZALAPH: Welcome! Welcome! *Motions for Joseph and Mary to come in* There's always room in the tent of Zalaph!

JOSEPH: Sir, we're trying to get to Egypt, but we can't get any farther this night.
May we stay here?

Zalaph ushers Mary and Joseph in; as he talks, Zalaph's wife comes to guide Mary to a place in the circle.

ZALAPH: The Lord has blessed me by bringing you here. Come, eat with us, stay with us as long as you can!

ZALAPH'S WIFE: *to Mary* Come my daughter, sit here by me.

As Zalaph and his wife get Mary and Joseph seated, the dancers cluster together around Madam Hodesh. They whisper to each other.

ZALAPH: *to Joseph* Not five minutes ago my kinsman Hachaliah here *gestures toward Hachaliah* was telling us about the Holy Child and how the magi came from a far country to worship the Child and to give him gifts.

JOSEPH: Yes, they did. Shepherds from our own country and wise men from far away all bowed down and worshipped Him.

M. HODESH: *to Joseph* Sir, we too wish to worship the Holy Child and to give him a gift. We have no gold. Or frankincense. Or myrrh.
May we dance for Him?--as a gift?

JOSEPH: *nodding his head* Yes. Indeed, yes. It is what is in the heart that makes a gift to God a gift.

The HODESH DANCERS dance and then kneel before the Christ Child.

CURTAIN

The End of the Play

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