

THE STRANGE NEW STAR

A Christmas Play by Jewell Ellen Smith

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[Return to the Jewell Ellen Smith Home Page](#)

Introduction to the Play:

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem,... there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying...we have seen his star ... and are come to worship him.... and, lo, the star which they saw in the east went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was."

--From Matthew 2

Purpose: To tell the old Christmas story in a new way.

Theme: The star shining down on Bethlehem was a figurative fulfillment of prophecy.

The Child born in Bethlehem was a fulfillment of prophecy and God's promise.

Background Scripture: Matthew 2; Luke 1 and 2; Isaiah 7:14 and 9:2-7; quotations from Job, Psalms, and Revelation.

Players required: About 40, including a few teenagers and three infants.

Length of play: About 1½ hours.

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

PLACE: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Shepherds' Field on the outskirts of Bethlehem.

THE CHARACTERS, in order of their appearance:

ACT I

Simeon -- a just and devout old citizen of Jerusalem, the lifelong friend of Anna.

Anna -- an aged prophetess, 104 years old, who spends her time at the temple, "with fastings and prayers night and day."

First, Second, and Third Angels

Felix and Lucius -- Roman soldiers assigned as guards at Herod's palace

First and Second Priests -- religious leaders at the temple

Temple scribes -- Hiram, Jacob, and others

First and Second Guards, and Guard Lucanus -- King Herod's bodyguards

Herod -- The ruthless, despotic king of the Jews

The Magi, wise men from the east -- Kaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

ACT II

Abdeel, the foster son of shepherd Lamech and his wife Zillah.

Seroba, Abdeel's younger sister.

Zillah, the wife of shepherd Lamech of Bethlehem.

Obed, a shepherd boy working for Lamech.

Lamech, a Bethlehem shepherd, the cousin of Simeon.

Carpenter Boy, a boy working for a carpenter.

Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth, the husband of Mary.

Jerusha, the wife of shepherd Ira.

Children of the shepherds:

He-li, young son of Ira and Jerusha

Eunice, small daughter of Noga and Zerina

Nag-ge, young son of Noga and Zerina

No-e, teenage daughter of Noga and Zerina

Aquila, daughter of Ira and Jerusha

Zerina, the wife of shepherd Ira

Noga and Ira, Bethlehem shepherds and cousins of Lamech

Holiel the Hermit, a learned old shepherd who lives in a cave

ACT III

Angel of the Lord

A band of angels (at least six)

Mary, mother of the Christ Child

Christ Child

A young couple and infant from Bethany

A young couple and infant from Jericho

Death Angel

SCRIPT

ACT I, Scene 1

Scene 1: One morning in early spring. At the steps of the temple in Jerusalem. The aged Prophetess Anna, who "departs not from the temple, but serves God with fastings and prayers night and day," meets the devout Simeon, a Jerusalem resident for many years, who is just coming to the temple. As old friends, they greet each other warmly.

SIMEON: Ah, Prophetess Anna! Here you are, as always.

ANNA: The LORD's peace to you, Simeon.

SIMEON: The LORD's peace to you. *Lets tone become dejected.* May he have mercy on us both.

ANNA: *With true concern.* Old friend, you look long of face this morning. What's the matter? Why are you so downcast?

SIMEON: *Shaking his head and rubbing a hand across his beard.* I don't know. *Hesitates.* Yes, I do know. And I am truly dejected. As I made my way through the streets this morning, I could hardly walk for the Roman soldiers. Twice they almost forced me into the ditch. But I trudged on, thinking,

"Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, you are supposed to be the great 'City of Zion.' But what are you? You are a slave. A slave of the Roman Empire! We are all slaves, under the heel of the Romans!"

ANNA: *Trying to encourage Simeon.* It will not always be so.

SIMEON: *As if he did not hear Anna.* About that time I passed by Herod's palace, and I thought:

"Ah, King Herod, you ruthless tyrant, they call you 'Herod the Great!' But you are not great. You do nothing to free Israel and its people. Sure, you built the temple.--People even call it 'Herod's Temple.'--And you've erected palaces and cities throughout the land. But there you sit high on your throne--year after year--with Rome's consent--and leave our nation to weep and mourn for deliverance."

ANNA: *Interrupting.* Simeon! Remember. Remember. It is God--not some king-- who will deliver our nation Israel. The LORD has promised.

SIMEON: Yes, Anna, I know the promise, but--

ANNA: God will comfort his people. The old prophets foretold it. God will redeem Jerusalem. *See Isaiah 52.* He will send a Redeemer for all Israel.

SIMEON: Anna, you are a prophetess. You never leave this temple. *Gives a wave of the hand.* You fast and you pray, night and day; so it's easy for you to--

ANNA: True, God made me a prophetess. And I do pray to him night and day. And He speaks to me. But this I tell you now is not what I foretell. It is a prophecy from of old! It is God's plan as He revealed it to Isaiah, seven centuries ago. Here are Isaiah's words:

"The LORD himself shall give you a sign: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.'"--or God with us. *Isaiah 7:14*

SIMEON: It does my heart good to hear these things.

ANNA: We must not lose courage, faith or hope, Simeon. "All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." *Isaiah 52:10b.* Someday the Redeemer will come.

SIMEON: Yes. Someday. But I shall not live to see Him. The end of my days is almost at hand.

ANNA: *Gently.* Don't feel that way.

SIMEON: *Sighs, starts moving on.* I mustn't burden you with my worries. Death must come to every man. But, when I say my prayers this morning, I'm going to

beg the LORD in His mercy to prolong my days. *Simeon turns abruptly and comes back to Anna and speaks in a brighter tone.* I almost forgot! Have you heard the latest decree sent out from Rome?

ANNA: Decree? What decree?

SIMEON: There's a new proclamation out. I heard it less than an hour ago, down at the marketplace. Caesar Augustus has ordered a census.

ANNA: A census?

SIMEON: Each man and his family must go to the city of his forefathers and be counted.

ANNA: But why?

SIMEON: *Contemptuously.* Taxes! Taxes! Our great emperor wants to find out how much more taxes he can squeeze from us! *Clenches fist in squeezing motion.*

ANNA: *Much upset.* Taxes or no taxes, I can't go to any city of my forefathers! I'm descended from the ancient tribe of Asher. And our portion of the Promised Land was way over on the coast--north of Mt. Carmel. I can't walk from Jerusalem to Mt. Carmel!

SIMEON: *Soothingly.* Of course not.

ANNA: *Defiantly.* If Caesar Augustus wants me counted, he can just come count me here in Jerusalem! For 84 years I've lived in Jerusalem! Pha-nu-el, my husband, died here 84 years ago, and I've not left the city since that day!

SIMEON: I'm sure the authorities can make an exception in your case. So, don't worry. Me, I'll have to go to Bethlehem to sign the roll. As you've heard me say, I'm of the house and lineage of David--tribe of Judah.

ANNA: *Now calm.* Yes, you've told me that. You have kinsmen in Bethlehem, don't you? You could stay overnight with them.

SIMEON: *Lightly.* Oh, yes, I have cousins and more cousins over there. Lamech, and Ira, and Noga, and several more. Even old Holiel the Hermit is related to me. But they're all Shepherds.

ANNA: What's wrong with that? Shepherds are hospitable people.

SIMEON: Well, you see, this time of year shepherds have to stay out in the fields to keep watch over their flocks by night.

ANNA: Oh yes. It's that time again.

SIMEON: It's lambing time. But there's no problem. Bethlehem has a good-sized inn. I'll just arrange for lodging at the inn.

ANNA: When will you go? Right away?

SIMEON: Yes. Might as well get it over with.

Anna and Simeon go their separate ways.

CURTAIN: End of Scene 1

Scene 2.

Scene 2: A few minutes later. In an inner room of the temple. Simeon stands, praying--near an altar table and a seven-branched golden "candlestick."

SIMEON: *Looking up, hands folded.*

O, Lord, "Thou art my God, and I will praise thee: Thou art my God, I will exalt thee." *Psalm 118:28*

You have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. *Cf. Psalm 116*

I will walk before thee, O Lord, all the days of my life. But now my days grow short, and I hear a stirring of the death wind.

Let it not be so, Lord. In Thy mercy, lengthen my days. Grant that I may live to see the Redeemer--before I return to dust and am gathered to my people.

I long to see Israel's Saviour come. But, O Lord, I am thy servant. Thy will be done.

Simeon drops hands, turns and starts toward left stage. Three angels glide in, from right stage, and call to him.

1ST ANGEL: *Calling* Simeon! Honorable Simeon!

Simeon turns around, gasps in amazement, throws up his hands, and rushes towards the angels. He falls on his knees before them.

2ND ANGEL: The Lord God of Hosts has heard your prayer, Simeon.

3RD ANGEL: God's Spirit has sent us to speak to you--because you are just and devout.

SIMEON: *Stuttering, because of joy.* I-- I-- The-- The-- The Lord heard my prayer? He-- Uh-- Uh-- You mean the death wind is not--

1ST ANGEL: *Interrupting.* The prayers of a righteous man avail much, Simeon. The Lord will lengthen your days!

SIMEON: *Still wide-eyed in amazement and disbelief.* He will? God will let me live to-- to-- see the Salvation of Israel?

2ND ANGEL: You will live to see the Messiah!

3RD ANGEL: You will not see death before you have seen the Lord's Christ! *Cf. Luke 2:26.*

Angels exit slowly, off right stage. When Simeon realizes that they are fading away, he scrambles to his feet, follows them a few feet as he cries out his questions.

SIMEON: How will I know him? Where will he come? Who will he be? *Still speaking very fast.* Will he come here to the temple? When will--

Simeon stops, draws a long breath, gives a sigh; then he turns and clasps his hands together tightly and begins talking to himself--with great joy.

I've seen a vision! Angels were here! Right here! They said I will see the Messiah! Before I see death! I will SEE him! The Redeemer is coming! Oh,

Anna must hear about this! *Hurries out toward temple entrance, calling as he goes.* Anna! Anna! Prophetess Anna! Come here!

Scene 3

Scene 3: Note: there is no break between scenes 2 and 3. Simeon finds Anna at the temple steps, her cane in one hand, a small bundle in the other.

ANNA: You called me, Simeon?

SIMEON: *Still exuberant.* The most wonderful thing: A few minutes ago, while I was praying, God sent angels to tell me that I will not see death until I have SEEN THE MESSIAH!

ANNA: You had a vision of angels?

SIMEON: Three angels came! And the talked to me—just like I'm talking to you. Oh, Anna, think of it! I will live until the Messiah COMES!

ANNA: *Slowly.* Simeon, Simeon, how marvelous! *Quickens speech.* That means our Redeemer is coming soon! Maybe I'll get to see him, too!

SIMEON: Yes! And--

Two Roman soldiers, Felix and Lucius, come striding in, talking as they enter. Their remarks to each other are made while Simeon and Anna are still talking.

ANNA: *As soldiers enter and are talking.* Oh, goodness! Soldiers! I'd better leave! *Moves so that Simeon is between her and soldiers.*

SIMEON: *Reassuring tone.* No, Anna, stay where you are.

FELIX: I still say this palace guard duty is the craziest assignment in Jerusalem! I'll be glad when my tour in this wretched place is finished!

LUCIUS: Me, too. I'd give my right arm to be back in Rome.

FELIX: *Now near Simeon and Anna.* Old Man, where'll we find the priests and the temple scribes?

SIMEON: The priests and scribes?

FELIX: That's what I said.

LUCIUS: King Herod wants 'em over at the palace--right away. Them and their scrolls.

SIMEON: What does he want with priests and scribes and scrolls? He's not a religious man. He doesn't know one word that's in the sacred books of Israel!

ANNA: *Firmly.* That's for sure!

SIMEON: What's going on?

LUCIUS: We're just palace guards. We don't know what's going on.

FELIX: Well-l-l-l-- *In long drawn-out tone.* I know some of the intrigue going on at the palace. Me and one of the bodyguards are pretty good friends, and he tells me lots of stuff--stuff you wouldn't believe! *Looks around to make sure he's not being overheard.* Right now, King Herod is scared half out of his wits. He thinks there's a plot to steal his throne!

ANNA: No plot against that Herod has ever succeeded! But go on. What's happened?

FELIX: Early this morning--it was barely daylight--a strange looking caravan came into Jerusalem from the East. And the minute the men--there were three of 'em--the minute they got down off their camels, they went straight to the palace to see King Herod.

LUCIUS: Are their camels ever big and fat! I saw 'em, myself. They're a foot taller than these regular camels you see every day. And rich trappings! Even their saddle blankets have gold tassels!

FELIX: These travelers told King Herod that they're Magi.--Now what a Magus is, I have no earthly idea.--And--

SIMEON: Magi are holy men who study the stars. They are wise men. Highly respected in the East.

FELIX: Well, guess what these wise stargazers asked King Herod?

ANNA: We have no idea.

FELIX: They said--and these are their exact words, 'cause my friend was standing right there by the throne--they said:

"Where is he who is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him!"

SIMEON: They asked Herod about a new king of the Jews? No wonder he's upset! He's been king nearly thirty years.

ANNA: *Aside, to herself, in a musing tone.* These Magi followed a star? Hmm--now let me think. Somewhere--in the oldest writings--there is a Star prophecy. I'll think of it by and by. A star?

FELIX: My friend said King Herod nearly fell off his throne! That would've been a sight!

LUCIUS: *With some impatience* Felix, we'd better find those priests and scribes, and get back to our unit.

FELIX: Guess you're right. *Turns to Simeon.* Old man, where--

SIMEON: The priests and scribes are right back there in the next room. *Waves hand towards right stage* I'll go call them, if you'd like.

FELIX: Do that. Tell 'em to get out here--on the double.

SIMEON: *As he moves slowly towards right stage exit* I'm still wondering why Herod sent for priests and scribes.

FELIX: *Calling after Simeon.* Tell 'em to bring all the writings. *Simeon plays no attention.* I don't think he heard me.

ANNA: You soldiers don't know what you're asking for! There are dozens of sacred scrolls: the books of Moses, the books of the Kings, the Chronicles, the books of Prophecy, the Psalms, the Proverbs and songs of King Solomon. I can't even remember them all!

LUCIUS: Ma'am, we're just carrying out orders.

Simeon returns with two priests, five scribes--all empty-handed.

FELIX: Where are the sacred scrolls?

1ST PRIEST: The holy books of the Israelites?

FELIX: That's what I'm talking about. When you get over to the palace, King Herod is going to order you to search your holy writings until you find a certain prophecy. So, you--

2ND PRIEST: What certain prophecy?

FELIX: It's got something to do with where a new king is to appear.

1ST PRIEST: *Rather upset.* Honorable Simeon, what do you make of all this? What would you do?

2ND PRIEST: *Coming closer to Simeon.* We never take the holy writings out of the temple!

SIMEON: In this case, I believe I'd take them. You can always bring them back. It's best not to displease King Herod.

ANNA: Yes. *Comes closer to priests.* Both of you are too young to remember what happened to the last priest who crossed the king. He drowned--very mysteriously.

1ST PRIEST: *Turns to scribes.* Hiram, you and Jacob go bring the sacred books. *Hiram and Jacob turn to leave.*

2ND PRIEST: Be extremely careful with them.

FELIX: *Calling out after Hiram and Jacob.* Don't be all day now! *Turns to others.* The rest of you come on.

LUCIUS: Our orders are to escort you straight to King Herod's quarters.

As group begins to exit, out left entrance, Hiram and Jacob come trotting back, loaded down with bundles of scrolls. Other scribes take part of scrolls. Hiram and Jacob lag behind to speak to Simeon.

HIRAM: *With much concern* Honorable Simeon, what'll we do if we can't find the prophecy about a new king for Israel? I've been making copies of the sacred writings for twenty years, but I'm not sure there is such a prophecy.

JACOB: I've never seen such a prophecy!

HIRAM: I know all the prophecies about the Messiah, but not about any certain king.

SIMEON: *Turning to Anna* Anna, you know all the ancient prophecies. Is there one that will tell the Magi where they could search for this king they're looking for?

ANNA: *To scribes.* Read to King Herod the words of the prophet Micah. Micah foretold that one day a king will come out of Bethlehem.

SIMEON: *Softly, to himself* Bethlehem! The City of David.

HIRAM: *Greatly relieved* Oh, thank you, thank you, Prophetess Anna!

JACOB: *With much enthusiasm* You've probably saved our necks!
Scribes hurry out to catch up with group. Simeon has begun to walk back and forth and he becomes quite excited, for the idea that the new king could be the long-promised Messiah has occurred to him.

SIMEON: *Breathlessly.* Anna! This new king must be the Messiah! The one who will save the nation Israel. Why, he could be down in Bethlehem this very minute! I may see him today! If I leave right now--and can hire a fast donkey-- I'll get there by sunset!

ANNA: Simeon, you--

SIMEON: *Ignoring Anna* Or if he's not in Bethlehem now, maybe he has already come to Jerusalem! The Messiah-King will have to come to Jerusalem to take the throne! Oh, this is a great day for me! *Starts out* Goodbye, Anna!

ANNA: *Calling, as if to a child* Simeon! Simeon! Our Messiah will not be a king when he comes!

SIMEON: *Coming back* What are you saying?

ANNA: The Messiah will come as a Babe, a little child.

SIMEON: *With disappointment* He won't be a king?

ANNA: Remember the words of Isaiah? "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son..."

SIMEON: That's right! Then-- Then-- Then if he comes as a newborn Babe, I'll see him right here in the temple. His people will have to bring him here for the sacrifice--to fulfill the Law of Moses!

ANNA: I would say so.

SIMEON: Ah, this is all going to work out fine. I'll hurry on down to Bethlehem and register for Caesar's ridiculous census. Then, I'll come back here quick as I can and watch! I'll look at every child brought to this temple! Until the right one comes! God will show me which one is the Child Messiah.

ANNA: Yes. He will--

SIMEON: Goodbye, Anna! *Hurries off.*

ANNA: God bless you, Simeon. *Anna pauses, turns, and talks to herself.* I'm still wondering about that star. Those Wise Men saw it in the East. And they followed it here to our land. What could it mean? Tonight, I will look at the star. And I'll say a prayer. *Anna walks away.*

End of Scene 3

Scene 4

Scene 4: Mid-afternoon, that same day, in the throne room of King Herod's palace. Herod sits on his throne chair, dozing--an empty wine glass in his hand. He is flanked by two bodyguards. Two Roman soldiers, who are palace guards, are on duty at the door. The scribes are gathered around the table on which they have

stacked the sacred scrolls and are going through them, one by one. Both priests are pacing the floor--the Second Priest right behind the First Priest.

1ST PRIEST: Gentlemen, try to read faster. We've been here five hours!

2ND PRIEST: With no lunch!

1ST PRIEST: Hiram, go back over the book of Micah. Prophetess Anna is as old as the hills of Judah, but she always knows what she's talking about!

Hiram puts down one scroll, picks up another.

HIRAM: Very well, I'll read Micah again. *Pauses, then jumps up from table.* Here it is! Here it is! Old Anna was right! It says "Bethlehem of Judah!"

All scribes put down their scrolls and breathe an audible sigh of relief. Both priests hurry over to Hiram.

1ST PRIEST: Read it to us!

2ND PRIEST: Slowly!

HIRAM: *Reading, slowly and deliberately.* "And thou, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah. For out of thee shall come a Governor that shall rule my people Israel!"

Hiram hands scroll to First Priest, who takes it and approaches throne.

1ST PRIEST: *Clearing his throat in an effort to wake Herod.* Ah-h-hh-mm! Ah-h-hh-mm! Your Highness? *Herod doesn't budge. Priest turns to First Guard.* Guard, we've finally found the prophecy. How do you wake up the king?

1ST GUARD: I'll show you. *Reaches around and picks up wine pitcher and glass in Herod's hand.* Now when I say "King Herod, here's you another little sip," and I pour the wine and poke the glass into his hand, you start talking, rather loud.

1ST PRIEST: All right. I'm ready when you are. *Moves closer to throne.*

GUARD LUCANUS: *Grinning.* I wish you luck!

1ST GUARD: *Pouring wine and trying to get the glass into Herod's hand.* King Herod, here's you another little sip!

1ST PRIEST: *Moderately loud.* King Herod, your highness, we've found the prophecy! It says--

Nothing happens, except that Herod begins to snore.

1ST GUARD: We'll try it again. *Turns to other guard.* Lucanus, this time, you shake him a little and then jump back. You know how mad he gets when we have to shake him.

LUCANUS: Yeah, he gets furious. *Steps closer to throne chair.*

1ST GUARD: *Raising voice.* King Herod, here's you a sip of this good wine!

Lucanus shakes Herod's shoulders, jumps back in place. Herod stirs.

First guard succeeds in getting Herod to lift the glass to his lips.

1ST PRIEST: *Much louder than at first.* King Herod! If it please your majesty, we've found the prophecy! Shall we read it to you?

HEROD: *Very groggy.* Prophecy? What prophecy? Oh yes, the prophecy. *Straightens himself up.* It took you long enough to find it! *Takes a gulp of wine.* What does it say?

1ST PRIEST: It says Bethlehem. The child king the Magi from the East seek will be born in Bethlehem.

HEROD: Read me the whole thing.

First Priest beckons frantically to Hiram, who hurries over. Priest holds scroll for him.

HIRAM: *Reading, in normal tone.* "And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah. For out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel."

HEROD: *Growling.* Aaa-a-h-hh! That doesn't tell me much. But never mind. You can go now. All of you! All of you! *Waves hand at group in sweeping out motion.* Get yourselves on out! Back to the temple! Or somewhere!

First Priest and Hiram bow, back away. Second Priest makes a big, ostentatious bow. Scribes gather up their scrolls, bow slightly--in unison--and ease themselves out as quickly as possible. They whisper among themselves as they exit. Herod turns to Guard Lucanus.

HEROD: Lucanus, go arrange a meeting with these three Magi. I want to speak with them privately.

LUCANUS: Sir, they're still waiting out in the courtyard.

HEROD: Then get 'em in here. I've got something to tell those stargazing travelers, and, something to ask them.

LUCANUS: Yes, Sir, King Herod. *Bows, hurries out.*

Herod steps down from throne chair, begins to pace back and forth. Swallows last gulp of wine and hands glass to First Guard.

FIRST GUARD: *Picking up wine pitcher.* Your highness, can I pour you a sip?

HEROD: *Still pacing.* No, no, not right now. You can go, and take those soldiers with you.

First Guard and two Roman soldiers leave. Herod begins talking to himself.

It's that star they talked about that worries me. I can handle a simple plot against my throne, but that star is a different matter. What could it possibly mean? Every time they mention this so-called Child "born king of the Jews" they keep saying WE HAVE SEEN HIS STAR! WE HAVE SEEN HIS STAR!

So, that star is the key to their whole search. Now, if I can find out when the star appeared, I'll know how to carry out my search.

Rubs hands together and then clenches right fist.

And believe me, I will search!

Lucanus enters, followed by Kaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. As Herod addresses them and calls their names, each bows.

LUCANUS: *In announcing tone* Your Highness King Herod, the Honorable Magi from the East! *Lucanus leaves.*

HEROD: *With warmth and charm.* Ah, Honorable Kaspar! Honorable Melchior! Honorable Balthasar! How kind of you to grant me a few minutes of your time.

Time is such a precious thing. It cannot be bought--not with silver, or with gold!

KASPAR: We are honored to confer with you again, King Herod.

HEROD: Won't you sit down? *Ushers Magi to places at table, sits down with them.*

MELCHIOR: *Eagerly* May I ask if Jerusalem's learned scholars and scribes have determined where the newborn king we seek may be found?

BALTHASAR: You had mentioned an ancient prophecy.

HEROD: *With seeming pleasure* Yes! Indeed yes! You are to go and search in the city of Bethlehem! The prophecy was quite clear. Bethlehem is the place.

Magi murmur their pleasure and each repeats the word "Bethlehem."

BALTHASAR: Is this Bethlehem far from Jerusalem?

HEROD: Fortunately, not. Just about half a day's journey. It is an old place--sometimes called "The City of David," for one of the early kings of Israel.

KASPAR: This is good news! *Turns to companions.* Just think, my friends, our long, long journey is almost ended.

HEROD: Will you leave Jerusalem today? And could I furnish you with a guide?

KASPAR: Thank you, no. The star is our guide. As for when we leave Jerusalem--that will depend on the clouds in the sky. We travel when all the stars are out and our guiding star is plainly visible.

BALTHASAR: When there are no clouds to hide its splendor!

HEROD: When did you first see this strange new star?

The Magi are delighted to discuss their favorite subject.

KASPAR: It was-- Hmm-- Let me think-- *Turns to companions.* Do either of you remember exactly when the star appeared? It's been almost two years, I think.

BALTHASAR: At least two years. I can't remember the exact month. *Turns to Melchior.* Melchior, do you remember the month?

MELCHIOR: No, I don't recall the date. It is the brightness and beauty that stands out in my memory. Never had I seen such a star! King Herod, at first we thought it might be two or three stars clustered together! *Waves hands to show clustering*

KASPAR: *With much enthusiasm* Its brilliance was, and is, almost unbelievable!

HEROD: *Anxious to establish a date and then to get rid of the Magi.* Yes, yes, I'm sure of that.--Then, we're safe in saying the star first appeared two years ago?

KASPAR: Yes, King Herod. In the spring. Probably in your month of Nisan.

HEROD: *Getting up.* Ah now, my honorable Magi, when you reach Bethlehem, search diligently for the Child King. And when you have found him, come back and tell me. I, too, would like to go and pay my respects.

Magi rise.

KASPAR: thank you, King Herod. Thank you for receiving us. For your graceful hospitality. For your helpful information.

Magi bow, in unison.

HEROD: *Bending slightly at the same time Magi bow.* The pleasure was mine.

Magi leave slowly, walking with much dignity.

HEROD: *Rubbing hands together, highly pleased with himself.* Well! That's that! For the time being, that is. *Strides out.*

CURTAIN -- End of Act I

ACT II, Scene 1

Scene 1: The afternoon of the same day. At the home of shepherd Lamech, on the outskirts of Bethlehem. Lamech has gone into the village. Zillah and Serobah are packing food for Lamech and Abdeel to take when they go out to the sheepfold to spend the night. Abdeel is polishing his brass lamp. Seroba, like any teenage girl, is more interested in teasing her brother than in packing cakes of bread into a basket. As soon as the curtain is opened--and Zillah's back is turned--Seroba playfully snatches the lamp out of Abdeel's hands and makes off with it.

ABDEEL: Seroba! Gimmie back my lamp! *Grabs for lamp, but misses*

SEROBA: You don't need it! I need it!

ABDEEL: *Jumping up to chase Seroba* Come back here with my lamp!

SEROBA: I like the way you've got it shined for me! *Darts out the door*

ABDEEL: Seroba, you're mean as a snake!

ZILLAH: *Without looking up from her work, and with the patience of a mother long accustomed to spats between her children* Children! Children!

ABDEEL: Mother, make Seroba bring me back the lamp!

ZILLAH: The lamp?

ABDEEL: I've got to have it ready to take with us. Father will be back from Bethlehem any time now, and he said to have all our gear together so we can get out to the sheepfold before sundown. I have to have my lamp. We're having dark, cloudy nights this week!

ZILLAH: Yes, son, I know. *Calls loudly* Seroba!

Seroba pokes her head inside the door. She is holding the lamp behind her back.

SEROBA: *All sweetness and innocence* Did you call me, Mother?

ZILLAH: Yes. Give Abdeel's lamp back to him. It'll be dark tonight out at the sheepfold. *Starts folding blanket to make a bedroll*

SEROBA: *Handing lamp to Abdeel* Here's your precious brass lamp!

Abdeel snatches the lamp and starts polishing again.

Seroba turns so that Zillah can't see the face she makes at her brother.

ZILLAH: Seroba, it's past time for you to go milk the goats. Get your crock and go on. And be careful with the nannie that has the young kid.

SEROBA: Aw, Mother! I hate milking those goats! Why don't you ever have Abdeel milk 'em?

ZILLAH: *In matter-of-fact tone* Men's and boys hands are too big and clumsy to milk goats. You know that.

Abdeel grins, pokes both spread-out hands over for Seroba to see.

ABDEEL: Yeah! See how big and clumsy my hands are! *As an aside* Thank goodness!

Zillah's back is still turned to the teenagers. Seroba slaps at Abdeel's hands, but misses She flips his cap off and runs out.

ABDEEL: Seroba, one of these days! So help me, I'll--

Lamech's hired shepherd boy Obed calls, from off stage.

OBED: *Loudly.* Abdeel!

ABDEEL: That's Obed! *Sticks cap on head and rushes out, leaving lamp on table.*

ZILLAH: *To herself.* Oh, mercy! I hope nothing's happened to the sheep! *Starts toward door.*

Seroba, Abdeel, and Obed come hurrying in. Obed is carrying a newborn lamb, wrapped in a piece of tattered blanket.

SEROBA: Look, mother! Look! It's a little lamb!

ZILLAH: *Folding back edge of blanket.* Such a tiny one!

ABDEEL: It's just been born! It's not more'n three hours old!

SEROBA: *Patting lamb on head.* He's gonna be mine! All mine!

ABDEEL: Obed, tell Mother what happened.

OBED: Well, Ma'am, it's lambing time.

ZILLAH: Yes, I know.

OBED: Well, Ma'am, the first ewe to bring forth didn't have one lamb. And she didn't have two lambs. She had three lambs!

ZILLAH: My goodness! I never heard of such a thing!

OBED: One of the shepherds said it wouldn't happen again in forty years. Another one said it was a good omen. Then about that time Holiel the Hermit passed by, and he said bring this littlest one to you, Ma'am, 'cause the mother ewe can't take care of but two lambs.

ZILLA: Of course not.

SEROBA: Can we keep him, Mother? Can we? Can we?

OBED: Holiel the Hermit said feed him on goat's milk.

ZILLAH: Sure, we'll keep him, and try him on goat's milk. *Pauses* Maybe the nannie with the young kid will adopt him! Little goats and little lambs look just about alike.

SEROBA: *Reaching for lamb* Obed, let me hold him!

As Seroba is taking the lamb, Lamech arrives from the village and ushers in Simeon, who is somewhat exhausted from his trip down from Jerusalem.

ABDEEL: *At the instant Lamech reaches the doorway* Father's back!

LAMECH: *In high good humor* Hey, everybody, we have company! Look who I found in Bethlehem! Cousin Simeon, from Jerusalem!

ZILLAH: *Hurrying to greet Simeon* Why, Cousin Simeon! What a surprise! A pleasant surprise! God's peace to you.

As Zillah and Simeon are greeting each other, Seroba runs to her father to show him the lamb.

SEROBA: *Whispers.* Look! We've got a little lamb!

SIMEON: Ah, Zillah! God's peace to you. It's good to see you.

ZILLAH: It's been such a long time since you came to Bethlehem.

LAMECH: Cousin Simeon, you remember our children--Abdeel and Seroba.

ABDEEL and SEROBA: *Not in unison* God's peace, Cousin Simeon.

SIMEON: Ah, yes! I remember. You found them in the desert that same year that I moved to Jerusalem. *Turns to Zillah* Zillah, I remember you'd call Abdeel "Little Desert Fox," and Seroba was "Little Desert Flower!"

ABDEEL: Sir, she still calls us that--sometimes.

LAMECH: *Waving a hand toward Obed* This is Obed, one of my shepherd boys. My flock is so big now I have to hire help, and Obed is just about the best young sheepherder in Bethlehem.

OBED: *Bashfully* God's peace, Sir.

SIMEON: Obed, son, when I was a young sprout like you, I was a shepherd boy. I wish I were one now, but my old legs tell me I'd never make it anymore. *Notices lamb and goes over to Seroba* What's this we've got here?

SEROBA: A newborn lamb!

SIMEON: What're you going to do with such a little fellow?

SEROBA: Keep him!

Zillah comes to lead Simeon over to the table. At the same time Zillah is getting Simeon seated, Lamech looks at the lamb, talks in low tones to Obed, Abdeel, and Seroba. This is not for the audience to hear until there is a break in the Zillah-Simeon conversation.

ZILLAH: Cousin Simeon, come sit down. I know you're worn out from your journey.

SIMEON: *Easing himself down on the stool and leaning on the table.* Thank you, Zillah. *Hands his staff to Zillah.* I must apologize for coming to your home like this. But when your husband found me stranded at the inn, he insisted.

ZILLAH: It's good to have you here. *Leans staff against wall, pours Simeon a cup of wine* You came because of the census?

SIMEON: *Taking cup* Yes, Caesar's census! Such a nuisance. I had no idea Bethlehem would be so crowded.

ZILLAH: More and more people come every day.

SIMEON: The innkeeper just sort of laughed--and then apologized--when I asked for lodging. "No room!" he said. *Sips wine* I felt right sorry for one young couple. They had just come in all the way from Nazareth, and the innkeeper had to turn them down too.

ZILLAH: They had come all the way from Nazareth in Galilee? That's a long journey!

SIMEON: The little wife looked so young and so weary. And it was quite evident she is soon to be a mother. The innkeeper told them they were welcome to sleep in one of the stables. So I think that's what they were going to do.

Simeon picks up Abdeel's lamp, looks at it with keen interest.

This is an unusual oil lamp. Why, it's made so you can adjust the amount of oil that reaches the wick. Never saw one like that.

ZILLAH: It's Abdeel's. He wouldn't part with it for a million shekels.

The talk between Lamech and teenagers becomes louder. Spotlight picks them up.

LAMECH: *To Seroba.* Take the lamb outside now.

SEROBA: Can he be my lamb, Father? All mine? Please!

LAMECH: *With a laugh.* Ah, child, if he lives, he will belong to the whole family. But you can take care of him.

SEROBA: Oh, goodie! *Hugs lamb closer as she takes him out.* You pretty little lambkin! Of course you're gonna live!

LAMECH: *To boys.* Abdeel, you and Obed go on out to the flock. Keep good watch tonight, and I'll come early in the morning.

OBED: Yes, sir. *Walks on out. Abdeel picks up basket of food and turns to leave.*

LAMECH: Abdeel?

ABDEEL: Yes, sir?

LAMECH: Dip out a cup of our best oil and take it up to Old Shepherd Holiel. I promised it to him yesterday--for one of his sheep that has a bad place on its head.

ABDEEL: Yes, sir. I'll take it. I love to hear the old hermit talk.

LAMECH: Now, son, I know we all call him "the old hermit," but you be very respectful to him. He is a wise old shepherd.

ABDEEL: Yes, sir. *Scoots out.*

Lamech joins Simeon at the table. Zillah pours him a cup of wine.

SIMEON: *As Lamech is coming to the table* Did I hear you mention Old Holiel the Hermit?

LAMECH: Yes, sir. He's still up there in his cave. He keeps a handful of sheep, and once in a while he comes down and talks to us other shepherds.

SIMEON: Does he still have that huge old water jar full of scrolls?

LAMECH: I don't know about that. I do know that he studies the stars and that he knows by heart every Psalm King David ever wrote.

ZILLAH: I just love to hear him say that one that starts off, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..."

SIMEON: It's a strange thing about Holiel. We were boys together here in Bethlehem--distant cousins, in fact. Holiel's father sent him to Jerusalem to sit at the feet of the finest teachers. Wanted him to become a scribe or maybe a teacher, himself. But Holiel wanted to be a shepherd.

LAMECH: He is no ordinary shepherd. People around here consider him something of a seer.

ZILLAH: Tell Cousin Simeon what the saying about Holiel the Hermit is.

SIMEON: Saying?

LAMECH: Yes, we have a sort of saying. It goes like this: "When you don't know what to do, go ask Holiel the Hermit!"

SIMEON: *Laughing* That's pretty good! I'd like to see Old Holiel. *Picks up Abdeel's lamp again.*

ZILLAH: You can! Lamech can take you up to see him--first thing in the morning. It's not far to his cave.

SIMEON: First thing in the morning--as soon as it's daybreak--I've got to go back to Jerusalem.

ZILLAH: Couldn't you stay and visit us a few days?

SIMEON: Thank you, no. As I've already told Lamech, I have to be at the temple every day now. This morning I had a vision of angels and they told me that I WILL NOT SEE DEATH UNTIL I HAVE SEEN THE MESSIAH!

ZILLAH: *With amazement.* The Messiah! Why, Cousin Simeon!

SIMEON: I'm almost sure he will be one of the newborn babes brought to the temple for the Law of Moses ceremony. So, I have to be there.

ZILLAH: *Marveling* The Messiah is coming as a newborn babe?

Abdeel comes dashing in, looking for his lamp. When he sees Simeon holding it, he hesitates, and then comes over to the table.

ABDEEL: Cousin Simeon, sir, could I please have the lamp?

SIMEON: Why sure, son. *Hands lamp to Abdeel.*

ABDEEL: Thank you, sir. *Hurries out.*

SIMEON: That's a fine boy you have there. God smiled on you two the day you found those orphan children in the desert.

LAMECH: Yes. It was a tragedy for the poor parents--murdered by roving thieves and cutthroats--but it was a blessing to us. *Lowers voice and changes to confidential tone* I worry, though, Cousin Simeon, about the boy.

SIMEON: Why so?

LAMECH: He's nearly a grown man, and he's still afraid of the dark!

ZILLAH: When he was little--when we first got him--he would cry out in the night! As if he were having dreadful dreams! He'd scream, "It's dark! It's dark! Where's the light?"

SIMEON: Poor child. He was dreaming of the horrible night his parents were murdered, and he and little Seroba were left in the desert.

LAMECH: Did you notice his lamp is made of brass?

SIMEON: That's the first thing that caught my eye.

LAMECH: I had it made for Abdul when he was about five years old. Even now, many a night he burns it all night long.

SIMEON: *Pats Lamech on shoulder.* Don't fret yourselves. Children have a way of outgrowing their childhood fears. One day he will give up his lamp.

LAMECH: *Getting up.* I hope so. Let's go see what luck Seroba is having with her lamb and that nannie goat.

All start out, with Simeon going in front.

ZILLAH: *As stage whisper, behind Simeon's back* Lamech, do you suppose Cousin Simeon really saw angels in the temple?

LAMECH: *Shaking his head, speaking in stage whisper.* Na-a-ah! Couldn't be! *Points finger at Simeon's back.* He's just getting old.

All exit--END OF SCENE 1.

ACT II, Scene 2

Scene 2: in the afternoon, three days later. At the home of Lamech and Zillah. Zillah and Seroba are waiting for two other shepherd wives and their children to stop by so that they can all go together out to Shepherds' Field, where the shepherds are camped out with their flocks. The women will carry food and all will have supper together. Zillah is rather impatient as she sits waiting. Seroba whiles away the time, petting the three-day-old lamb in her lap.

ZILLAH: I do wish those women and children would come on! We've got to get out to Shepherds' Field and back before dark.

SEROBA: Who all is going with us?

ZILLAH: Nobody except cousin Jerusha and cousin Zerina and their children. It will be nice to eat supper together--if they'll just hurry and get here. Go put the lamb in the pen so we can leave the minute they come.

SEROBA: Mother, let me take the little lamb with me.

ZILLAH: Take him with you? What on earth for?

SEROBA: So Father and Abdeel can see how much he's grown--in just three days.

ZILLAH: *Reluctantly.* All right. *there's a knock at the door* There they are, finally.
Run tell them we'll be right out.

Zillah ties on a scarf, picks up basket of food, and then hurries to get more oranges to stuff into basket. Seroba goes to the door, and there stands the Carpenter Boy, with a newly finished shepherd's staff for Old Holiel.

CARPENTER BOY: Ma'am, the carpenter I work for says could you please take this staff to Mister Lamech and get him to carry it on up to the Old Hermit's cave--and, and give it to Old Holiel?

SEROBA: Sure, we'll take it. *Carpenter Boy hands her the staff.*

CARPENTER BOY: You sure it won't be too much trouble?

SEROBA: It won't be any trouble. We're going out to Shepherds' Field in a few minutes, anyway.

Seroba returns to her mother, Carpenter Boy leaves.

Mother, it wasn't them. It was a carpenter boy--with this staff.

ZILLAH: *With surprise.* Your father didn't mention having a new staff made. *Sets food basket back on table, unwraps scarf.*

SEROBA: It's not Father's. It's for Hermit Holiel. The carpenter boy said to please take it to Father so Father can take it on up to his cave.

ZILLAH: Oh, I see. Old Holiel must have broken his staff.

There is a second knock. Zillah grabs up her scarf and basket. Both start towards the door.

ZILLAH: *Calling loudly.* We're coming, Jerusha!

There is another knock just as Zillah reaches the door. When she opens the door, there stands Joseph.

Oh! You're not Jerusha! I thought--

JOSEPH: *Standing at threshold, in view of audience* No, Ma'am. My name is Joseph, and I'm looking for the wife of a shepherd called Lamech.

ZILLAH: Well, that's me.

JOSEPH: Ma'am, they told me at the Bethlehem Inn that you sometimes serve as a midwife.

ZILLAH: Sometimes, yes. Come on in, sir. *Joseph moves away from door.*

JOSEPH: Then please come help my poor Mary! It's her firstborn!

ZILLAH: How far is it to your house?

JOSEPH: Right now, Ma'am, we're not in a house. We're in the stable next to the Bethlehem Inn. You see, we came for the census, and there just aren't any rooms at the inn.

ZILLAH: *With surprise* Oh! You're the people from Nazareth that Cousin Simeon told us about!

JOSEPH: We are from Nazareth. *With anxiety* Will you come, Ma'am?

ZILLAH: Of course I will. My daughter and I were fixing to go with our cousins out to Shepherds' Field--to take supper. But they can go on without me. Seroba, can you take--?

SEROBA: *Interrupting* I can take everything, Mother!

There is considerable noise and talking outside as Jerusha, Zerina and their children arrive. Jerusha pokes her head in the door. He-li and Nag-ge dart inside and go immediately to Seroba and the lamb.

JERUSHA: *Calling out.* Come on, Zillah! Let's go! Those hungry shepherds are probably wondering what's keeping us!

ZILLAH: *At door.* Step inside just a minute, Jerusha.

JERUSHA: *Coming in* Is something wrong?

ZILLAH: No, nothing wrong. It's just that I have to go into Bethlehem. *Leans over and whispers in Jerusha's ear and then speaks aloud again.* So if it's all right, I'll let Seroba take our basket and go on with you.

JERUSHA: Why sure! *Turns to where Seroba and children are absorbed in petting the lamb* Come on, Seroba. I'll give you a hand. *Grabs up food basket* What else is there to take?

SEROBA: Just this staff. *Holds out staff* And the Mangala box. *Points to game box on floor near table.*

HE-LI: *With much delight* The Mangala box! I'll take that! *Runs and grabs up box and bag of rocks, turns to Nag-ge* Come on, Nag-ge! Here, you take the rocks! *Hands bag to grinning Nag-ge.*

NAG-GE: Wow! These are heavy!

Both boys romp out. Seroba follows, carrying staff and lamb.

ZILLAH: *To Jerusha, as she is at the door* Tell Lamech I'll be back as soon as I can get back.

JERUSHA: I sure will. *Exits.*

ZILLAH: *To Joseph* I'll be ready in a second. *Goes over to chest in corner of room, lifts lid.*

JOSEPH: Now I hate to ask you, but my Mary didn't bring a thing with her from Nazareth. Do you have any cloth that would do for swaddling clothes?

ZILLAH: *In a tone to reassure Joseph* Why, I think so. *Rummages through chest, takes out a length of white cloth, holds it up* Yes, I can tear this into strips, and it'll do fine. *Looks back into chest as she talks* I'll take oil, of course, and the salt. *Takes up containers.*

JOSEPH: Oil and salt?

ZILLAH: Every newborn child has to be rubbed good with oil and a little salt before he's wrapped in the swaddling bands. Didn't you know that? *Starts out the door.*

JOSEPH: *Following Zillah Ma'am, I don't know much about such things. I just know that Mary's Child is a promise from God.*

End of Scene 2

ACT II, Scene 3

Scene 3: That same evening, at dusk. Out in the field where the Bethlehem shepherds have their sheepfold. The shepherds and their wives are just finishing supper. The teenagers (Abdeel, Seroba, Obed, No-e, and Aquila) are already playing a game of Mangala--on upper left stage. The younger children (He-li, Nag-ge, and Eunice) are watching the game and waiting their turn to play. Seroba has the lamb in her lap.

A small campfire separates the youngsters from their parents, who sit on the ground in an irregular circle--on right stage.

As the curtain opens, the youngsters are shrieking and laughing, the older people are talking; and there is the sound of sheep bleating. Spotlight picks up Mangala game.

ABDEEL: *Out of patience with his sister Seroba, it's not your turn. You know about as much about playing Mangala as that lamb in your lap!*

SEROBA: I know as much as you do, smarty! *Turns to Obed Obed, whose turn is it to play?*

He-li gets up, moves closer to Abdeel, watches play closely.

OBED: I think No-e is next.

NO-E: I'm putting three rocks into hole number seven! *Drops three pebbles into 7th hole of Mangala box.*

OBED: *Putting one rock into box* I want this pebble in good old number fourteen!

AQUILA: *Dropping two stones into box* Two into lucky number four!

Sheep bleat 3 times.

HE-LI: I wish you'd let me play Mangala!

NAG-GE: *Loudly* Me, too!

EUNICE: *Loudly* Me, too!

HE-LI: When can the rest of us play?

ABDEEL: Soon as I win this game. *Drops seven rocks--one by one--into Mangala box* That does it! *Jumps up* I've won! I've won!

He-li, Nag-ge, and Eunice clap their hands and squeal their delight. Losing players mutter their disappointment. All talk at the same time--to create much noise--as follows:

He-li: Yippee! Now we can play! *Shakes rocks out of Mangala box.*

Eunice: Our turn now!

Seroba: Aw, I wanted to win!

No-e: Abdeel, you always win! Are you sure you don't cheat?

Obed: We'll get you next time, Ab!

Aquila: I've never won a game of Mangala in my life!

Much sheep bleating. Spotlight shifts to grownups.

LAMECH: *Calling out.* Children! Children! Not so much noise over there! The sheep will never settle down! *Turns to companions* Our flocks seem more restless this evening than ever. *Finishes eating his piece of bread. One lone sheep bleats.*

IRA: *Reaching for more grapes* Yeah, they do. And I don't understand it.

NO-GA: Lamech, are you going to take the old hermit his new staff tonight? *Stuffs a couple of grapes in his mouth.*

LAMECH: *Getting up* Yeah. And I guess I'd better get on up there with it--before Old Holiel goes off to bed.

Lamech takes new staff from the bush where he had placed it earlier. Women quietly start putting away leftover food.

NO-GA: While you're up there, ask the old hermit what he thinks is making the sheep so fidgety, these past few nights.

IRA: I can tell you what he will say. He'll say it's on account of that strange new star! It does brighten up the sky.

LAMECH: It might be the star. I never saw one like it before in my life.

NO-GA: None of us have.

IRA: Old Holiel studies the stars, and he knows sheep. So he ought to tell us something.

LAMECH: *Calling to Abdeel as he strides off* Abdeel! Come go with me!

ABDEEL: *Scrambling to his feet* Yes, sir! *Starts toward Lamech, then darts back to grab up his brass lamp from the play area. He catches up with Lamech as they both exit.*

Sheep bleat again. He-li leaves Mangala game and comes to lean on the shoulder of his father, Ira. Light focuses on shepherds and wives.

ZERINA: Noga, what strange star are you men talking about?

NOGA: *Still eating grapes.* You haven't noticed that big new star?

ZERINA: No.

JERUSHA: *Picking up the basket of grapes* Me, neither. But then I don't sit up nights watching sheep and looking at the stars, like you shepherds do. *Passes basket of grapes to Noga, who takes a few and hands basket on to Ira. Ira and He-li take a small bunch and Ira hands the basket back to Jerusha.*

IRA: You women miss a lot--staying in the house all the time.

NOGA: We spotted the new star earlier this week. It comes up in the east--right soon after the Evening Star. But it's three times as big as the Evening Star.

ZERINA: *To Jerusha* Tonight we'll take special notice, won't we, Jerusha?

JERUSHA: We sure will. Right now, though, we'd better gather up things and get the children back home--before dark sets in.

Women busy themselves with food. Men ease themselves over closer to fire and out of the way. Youngsters continue dropping rocks into the Mangala box.

HE-LI: *At his father's shoulder, and speaking in his most persuasive tone.* Father, let me stay out here with you tonight!

IRA: *With surprise.* Why, son, what for?

HE-LI: So you can show me that strange new star!

IRA: *Warmly.* All right! You can stay, and I'll show you the star. You're getting big enough to be a shepherd, anyway. *Puts arm around He-li. He grins, sits down by No-ga.*

JERUSHA: *Calling loudly* Come on, children! Time to go home!

Youngsters talk to each other as they follow Jerusha and Zerina offstage. Obed comes over to shepherds, bringing the Mandala box. He hands it to He-li.

HE-LI: Father, can we play a game of Mandala?

IRA: No, no, son. We've got to get off to sleep. Shepherds have to sleep when they can. *Turns to Obed* Obed, maybe you'd better go check on the sheep. Walk all the way around the fold.

OBED: Yes, sir. *Leaves.*

Ira goes for his bedroll, hands a blanket to He-li.

NO-GA: Lamech and Abdeel won't be back for a while, but I think I'll turn in, too. *Lights go down low as Ira, No-ga, and He-li wrap blankets around themselves and lie down to sleep. The sheep bleat faintly, gradually quieting down.*

End of Scene 3

Scene 4

Scene 4: That same evening. At the entrance of Holiel the Hermit's cave. Holiel is taking a close look at his new shepherd's staff. His broken one leans against the wall, not far from a broom made of brush and a long-used water jar. Lamech sits on a stool. Abdeel stands, watching the old shepherd.

HOLIEL: *Running his hand up and down the staff and tapping it on the ground to test its strength.* This is a fine new staff. It should last me the rest of my life.

LAMECH: Wild olive wood is durable.

Holiel leans the new staff against wall, near old one.

ABDEEL: Sir, how did you happen to break your old staff?

HOLIEL: Son, it happened after the last rain we had. One of my sheep, an old ram I call Zeke--his real name is Ezekiel--Zeke strayed off into a bad rocky place

and slid down into a crevice. And I was trying to help him climb out when the crook of my staff just popped half in two!

ABDEEL: What happened to Zeke?

HOLIEL: Zeke finally scrambled out--somehow. Of course he got all skinned up and bruised. But he's all right now.

LAMECH: Sir, here lately, our sheep have been very restless--especially at night after the stars come out. And when we noticed a strange new star in the sky, we-

HOLIEL: *With excitement* Ah, you've seen it, too. What a star! So bright! So big! I can't wait for it to come out again tonight!

LAMECH: My cousins were wondering if it's the star that's making the sheep so fidgety.

HOLIEL: I couldn't say about that. Sometimes, sheep can be very stupid. Other times, they sense things long before people do.

It's the meaning of that star that fascinates me. I wish I know why it's there.

ABDEEL: Sir, folks say you know everything about the stars!

HOLIEL: No, son, not everything. I look at the stars--almost every night. And I think:

"How great is our God! The sun, the moon, and the stars are the 'work of his fingers.'" Lines from the songs of David the King come to me:

"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork ... He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them by their names."

Some nights, I go in my cave and bring out one of the old sacred scrolls and read it here by the light of the stars.

ABDEEL: *Much fascinated* What does it say?

HOLIEL: Much, my son. Very much. It says our God will send the Messiah. It says our God "does great things past finding out. Yes, and wonders without number." *From Job 9*

LAMECH: Honorable Holiel, would you read some of these writings to my son?

ABDEEL: *Eagerly* Would you, sir?

HOLIEL: *Somewhat surprised* Why, yes! With pleasure! *Turns to Abdeel.* Abdeel, step inside the door and look to your left. You'll see a water jar, full of scrolls. Just bring me the whole jar, and I'll pick out something to read to you.

ABDEEL: *Much pleased.* Yes, sir! *Jumps up and goes for jar, comes right back.*

HOLIEL: I've had the scrolls many years--ever since I studied in Jerusalem, when I was young.

LAMECH: That makes me think. My cousin Simeon from Jerusalem was asking about you the other day.

HOLIEL: I'd like to see old Simeon. Does he look well?

LAMECH: Real well. He was telling--

HOLIEL: *Getting up to help Abdeel with jar.* Here, Son, let's set it right over here. *Takes out a scroll, begins to unroll it as he sits down.* This is a good one for you to hear. Sit back down.

Abdeel sits back down on the ground.

What I'm going to read to you is about the Messiah God has promised.

Abdeel edges closer to listen.

First, now, old Isaiah the prophet is talking. *Begins reading.*

"... The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined...."

Holiel interrupts his reading and becomes highly excited as a new thought about the star and the Messiah occurs to him.

"The people ... have seen a great light!" *Jumps to his feet.*

That's it! That's it!

The new star is the great light!

It's for the Messiah!

The Messiah will be like that bright star, shining in the darkness!

It's His star! It is! It's the Messiah's star!

He's coming!

LAMECH: *Marveling* The Messiah's star! Yes! That's what it is!

ABDEEL: *With awe* God must have made it for Him!

HOLIEL: Yes! God made it!

ABDEEL: *Eagerly* Read on some more!

HOLIEL: *Reading from scroll* "...unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall 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 for ever."

ABDEEL: *Much impressed with what he has just heard* Our Messiah will be a great king!

LAMECH: *Getting to his feet* What should we do? Maybe we should start searching for this Holy Child King!

HOLIEL: No, Lamech. Not yet. We must wait.

God will choose his own time and his own way to reveal the Messiah to us.

Pauses

We will watch the star. And wait.

Lights go down, out.

END OF Scene 4 and ACT II

ACT III, Scene 1

Scene 1. That same evening, just before midnight, at the sheepfold of the Bethlehem shepherds. All the shepherds except Abdeel are asleep near the campfire. Young He-li is curled up near his father, his head resting on the Mangala box. It is Abdeel's turn to guard the sheep during the night, and he is sitting by the fire, adjusting his oil lamp. Suddenly "the glory of the Lord shines round about him," and a group of angels appears in the distance. Abdeel, frightened almost speechless, drops his lamp and runs to Lamech. He shakes him vigorously.

ABDEEL: Father! Quick, father! Wake up! Father, you'll have to wake up!

LAMECH: *Still half asleep.* Abdeel? Son, don't tell me you're afraid of the dark TONIGHT! *Sits up, rubbing eyes, back turned to angels.*

ABDEEL: *With desperation* It's not the dark, Father! It's ANGELS!
Angels approach slowly.

LAMECH: *Yawns* Angels? You sound like old Cousin Simeon! Son, people don't see angels!

ABDEEL: *Pointing toward angels* Look father! Look! There they are!
Lamech turns around, sees band of angels.

LAMECH: *Much astonished* It is! *Scrambles to his feet, whirls around, and shakes Ira and Noga awake.*

Abdeel runs to Obed. He-li wakes, clings to Ira.

IRA: *Sits up, shields his eyes against the bright light* What's happened? *Gasps when he sees angels, grabs He-li and backs away.*

NOGA: *Much startled* The sheep? Are the sheep all right?

LAMECH: It's not sheep! It's angels! Look! *Points to Angel of the Lord, who is now within talking distance.*

Noga scrambles back, dragging his blanket. Obed jumps up, tries to hide behind Abdeel. Both boys back away from Angel of the Lord.

ANGEL OF THE LORD: *Coming closer to the shepherds.* Shepherds, don't be afraid. We bring you good tidings!

LAMECH: Ti-- Ti-- Tidings?

ANGEL OF THE LORD: Good tidings of great joy!

BAND OF ANGELS: *In unison* Great joy!

ANGEL OF THE LORD: Great joy, which shall be to all people!

BAND: *In unison* To all people! All people of the world.

ANGEL OF THE LORD: "Unto you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

BAND: *In unison* This day! This day! Born in the City of David!

SHEPHERD GROUP: *Not in unison, but each with a tone of awe* The Messiah?

BAND: *In unison* The Messiah! Jesus! The Christ! The Lord!

ANGEL OF THE LORD: This shall be a sign to you: "You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger!"

LAMECH: *Echoing angel's words* A Babe ... lying in a manger!

ANGEL OF THE LORD: Let all mankind give glory to God in the Highest!

BAND: *Joyously, in unison, rather loudly* All "glory to God in the Highest!"

ANGEL OF THE LORD: The coming of the Christ means "peace on earth, good will to men!"

BAND: *Softly, in unison* Peace! Peace! God's Peace and Good Will! *More loudly* ALL GLORY IN THE HIGHEST!

Angels fade away. The bewildered shepherds look at each other a few seconds and the all begin talking at the same time. Those on the ground scramble to their feet.

Ira: Let's go! Let's go! Let's go to Bethlehem!

Noga: The Messiah has come! Let's go find him!

Abdeel: They said he'd be in a stable--sleeping in a manger!

Obed: The angels said we could find him!

Lamech: Let's go to Bethlehem, right now! God has revealed the coming of the Messiah!

HE-LI: *To Ira.* Father, can I go? I want to see the Christ Child!

IRA: Sure, son!

OBED: *To Lamech.* Can I go, sir? Or do I have to stay with the sheep?

LAMECH: We'll all go!

NOGA: Let's go get our wives and children!

IRA: What about the old hermit?

LAMECH: Abdeel, you and Obed go get Holiel the Hermit! And we'll all meet at the big curve in the Bethlehem road.

ABDEEL: There where the road from Jerusalem comes in?

LAMECH: That's the place. Let's hurry!

All exit, going in different directions.

END of Scene 1

Scene 2

Scene 2. Just after midnight, at the stable in Bethlehem. All is silent. The Christ Child sleeps in the hay-filled manger. Mary and Joseph sit, looking at him. Animals in the stable are motionless. "The Strange New Star" shines down directly on the stable. After a bit, Mary and Joseph begin talking.

JOSEPH: Mary?

MARY: Yes, Joseph?

JOSEPH: What are you thinking?

MARY: *Gently touching the Child's face.* I'm thinking how beautiful He is.

JOSEPH: He is a beautiful Child.

MARY: And I'm thinking of what the angel Gabriel told me that day--about his name.

"Thou ... shalt call his name JESUS," he said.

"He shall be great,

"And shall be called the Son of the Highest! ... The Son of God ...

"And the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David.

"And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever;

"And of his kingdom there shall be no end." *Luke 1:31-35*

JOSEPH: And so it shall be, Mary. On the eighth day will come the circumcision, and we will call his name JESUS--just as the angel said.

MARY: And on the fortieth day, will we--

JOSEPH: On the fortieth day we will go to Jerusalem and take him to the temple! Just as the Law of Moses says.

MARY: We'll make the sacrifice? And have my purification ceremony?

JOSEPH: Everything! All that the Law of Moses requires. I'll buy a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons, for the sacrifice. And we'll present him to the Lord! *Luke 2:21-24.*

MARY: *As if she can visualize going to the temple* That will be a wonderful day! I can see the ceremony now. I wonder what those at the temple will say about little Jesus. *Smooths down straw around Christ Child.*

JOSEPH: They'll probably say: "So, his name is Jesus? That means 'Jehovah is salvation!'" Then, they'll say--

The Magi arrive at the stable entrance.

Mary! Some people are coming! *Gets up.* Unusual people! *Goes to greet visitors.*

The Magi bow to Joseph.

KASPAR: Sir, we are Magi--come from the east, from "the Land-between-two-rivers."

MELCHIOR: We are searching for a certain newborn king.

JOSEPH: A newborn king?

KASPAR: Yes.

JOSEPH: Well, sir, the Babe here in the manger is newborn--born this very night--and God has said he will be a king forever! But he may not be the one you seek.

KASPAR: We believe he is. In Jerusalem, King Herod advised us to come here to Bethlehem to search for the child "born king of the Jews."

BALTHASAR: It is the star, though, and an ancient prophecy that prove to us that this Child in the manger is the one.

JOSEPH: *With some surprise* Are you talking about the great new star shining down on Bethlehem tonight?

KASPAR: It is the star of a king. We first saw it in the east, and we've followed it for what seemed endless miles--until we reached the land of Judah.

JOSEPH: How did you know where the star would lead you?

KASPAR: We didn't know. We only knew your ancient Jewish prophecy about the coming of a Star King. It's a prophecy your ancestors left in Babylon--long ago when they were exiles in that land.

MELCHIOR: Babylonian scholars told us this prophecy is from one of your sacred books, and it goes like this:

"Behold, there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter (*or a Great King*) shall rise out of Israel."

BALTHASAR: *Very earnestly* So, we reasoned that the Divine Creator--who set all the stars in the heavens--had made this new star as a sign of the Holy King long promised to Israel!

JOSEPH: *With amazement* Oh! I see!

KASPAR: The Child asleep there in the manger is of Israel, that is, descended from Jacob, isn't he?

JOSEPH: Yes, Honorable Magi. He is. He is of the house and lineage of David the King.

KASPAR: *Turning to companions* My friends, there is no doubt. He is the Holy Child we seek.

MELCHIOR and BALTHASAR: *Nodding their heads in agreement* Yes!

KASPAR: *To Joseph* We came to worship him, and to give him gifts.

JOSEPH: Then, come. Come and see him. *Beckons group to come close to manger.*

As the Magi are proceeding to the manger, the shepherds and their families and Holiel the Hermit arrive at the stable entrance--left stage. They halt and Lamech whispers to the children.

LAMECH: Shh-hh-h! Children, be quiet!

The Magi follow Joseph. When they reach the manger, they bow down in unison and then rise. One by one they advance and present a gift. Joseph accepts each presentation.

KASPAR: I offer gold to this Child King who shall reign forever, over a kingdom that has no end! *Backs back.*

MELCHIOR: I bring him frankincense. *Backs back.*

BALTHASAR: I give him myrrh. *Backs back.*

Magi turn and leave--off right stage. Spotlight follows them out and then picks up shepherd group. Lamech, Zillah, Old Holiel, Seroba, and Abdeel are in forefront.

LAMECH: I wish we had some gifts to give to the Holy Child!

ZILLAH: *Handing basket of fruit to Lamech.* I brought this fruit for the young couple.

LAMECH: I mean some real gifts--for the Christ Child, himself.

SEROBA: *Coming to Lamech.* Father?

LAMECH: Yes, Seroba?

SEROBA: *Holding out lamb* We can give him our lamb!

All in group murmur approval, some saying one thing, some another--all at the same time, as follows:

A lamb! Yes!

That's a wonderful present!

A lamb is a perfect gift!

Anybody would like to get a lamb!

LAMECH: Yes, Seroba, we could give him the lamb.

ABDEEL: *Hurrying to Lamech* Father, I have something to give him! My lamp!
Holds out brass lamp.

All in group express surprise and approval, some murmuring one thing and some another--all at the same time, as follows:

That's good!

Give up your brass lamp?

That'll be a good gift, too!

Everybody needs a lamp, sometimes.

LAMECH: *At a loss for words* Why, son, I'm so surprised, I-- I-- I don't know what to say. *Turns to Holiel.*

Honorable Holiel, you're wise in such matters. Do you think it will be all right to offer a lamb and a lamp to the Holy Child?

HOLIEL: *Coming to Lamech* These are good gifts. If I were a prophet, instead of an old shepherd, these are the words I would say to you all: *Indicates whole group* Give the Child this little lamb. One day He will be called "the Lamb of God." *Cf. John 1:36.*

Give the Child the brass lamp. One day He will say "I am the light of the world." *Cf. John 8:12.*

Holiel moves a step or two.

Now, I have the third gift to give: my shepherd's staff! *Holds out staff.*

All in group murmur surprise, and approval.

LAMECH: Your new shepherd's staff?

HOLIEL: Yes. I will give the Holy Child this staff. He will be a shepherd. One day he will say, "I am the Good Shepherd!" And, He will lay down his life for his sheep. *Cf. John 9:14-15.*

Joseph approaches shepherd group.

JOSEPH: Come! All of you! Come and see Him!

All quietly gather in semi-circle before the manger and kneel--not in unison, but by two's and three's. As all continue to kneel, Seroba, Abdeel, and Holiel rise, one

by one, and lay their gifts at the foot of the manger. And each kneels down, and stays, close to the manger.

Lights go down, and out.

CURTAIN: End of Scene 2

Scene 3

Scene 3: One morning several weeks later, at the entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Prophetess Anna is coming toward the temple steps when she meets Simeon, who has just arrived. Dejected and discouraged, he walks slowly, head down.

ANNA: *Cheerfully.* God's peace, Simeon! You're late getting to the temple this morning.

SIMEON: Yes, I am.

ANNA: And your face is long again!

SIMEON: Ah, Anna, I'm troubled--in my mind, and in my heart.

ANNA: You will see the Messiah! You will. God has promised you. Didn't you tell me your Cousin Lamech sent you word from Bethlehem that the Holy Child has been born?

SIMEON: Lamech came and told me himself. But this morning when I passed through the marketplace, I heard a terrible thing! I couldn't believe it.

ANNA: What terrible thing?

SIMEON: King Herod has ordered that all the children of Bethlehem--from two years old and younger--be slain!

ANNA: *Gasps.* Oh! How horrible! That wicked Herod! How could he kill innocent children!

SIMEON: *Shaking his head.* Oh-h-h, it has me worried, worried for the Holy Child!

A young couple carrying an infant enter, but Anna and Simeon do not notice them, at first.

ANNA: *Trying to reassure Simeon.* Don't worry, Simeon. God will provide for his escape--to Egypt, or somewhere. I was told, on good authority, that God warned those Magi in a dream not to come back through Jerusalem. So God--

Anna sees couple with baby.

Look, Simeon! A couple with their firstborn son. Maybe this is the holy Babe!

SIMEON: Maybe. I saw the young Nazareth couple that day I went to Bethlehem, but my old faded eyes can't remember how they looked.

FIRST YOUNG FATHER: *Approaching Simeon* Sir, could you tell me where they sell the turtledoves and young pigeons? We've brought our firstborn--to make the Law of Moses sacrifice.

SIMEON: Son, you go through that entranceway there--to the left. *Points* But first, may I see the child?

1ST FATHER: *Proudly* Certainly, sir. *To wife* Bring our son!

Wife proudly uncovers child's face and smiles. Both Simeon and Anna look at the baby.

SIMEON: *With not much enthusiasm* He is a fine, big child.

ANNA: Yes, he is fine looking.

1ST MOTHER: He's forty days old today!

SIMEON: *To father* Son, are you from Nazareth?

1ST FATHER: No, sir. My family lives just outside Jerusalem, in the village of Bethany.

SIMEON: Bethany. I see. I'm watching for a young couple from Nazareth. Just go to your left there. *Waves couple on.* The turtledoves and pigeons are on sale in the outer courtyard.

Couple moves on. A second couple with an infant approach, as Simeon and Anna talk on.

ANNA: I could tell that wasn't the Holy Child--even before I saw his face.

SIMEON: I could sense he wasn't the one. *Sees second couple.* Look, Anna!

Another couple with their firstborn! Maybe this is the one!

2ND FATHER: *As he comes forward* God's peace to both of you.

ANNA: God's peace to you and yours.

Anna goes over to wife, and wife shows her the infant. Women smile, gesture to each other--as if talking, while men are talking.

SIMEON: God's peace, stranger. I suppose you've come to dedicate your son to the LORD--as the Law of Moses requires.

2ND FATHER: We have, sir. We came all the way from Jericho. And we thought we'd buy the turtledoves, or pigeons, after we got here.

SIMEON: Jericho? *Shakes his head in disappointment.* Well, if you're from Jericho, then you're not from Nazareth. I was hoping you'd be from Nazareth.

2ND FATHER: From Nazareth, sir?

SIMEON: Never mind. It would be too hard to explain it to you. You'll find the turtledoves and pigeons on sale in the outer courtyard. Just take the left door, there. *Points.*

Couple moves on, talking to each other.

2ND FATHER: That poor old man seemed so disappointed that we aren't from Nazareth.

2ND WIFE: I wonder why? What's so special about Nazareth?

2ND FATHER: I have no idea. *Couple exits.*

ANNA: I could tell that child wasn't the one--even before I saw his face.

SIMEON: This is very discouraging.

ANNA: Don't fret. The blessed Child will be brought to the temple. Simeon, I think I'd better go buy bread now, for tomorrow is the Sabbath. But I'll be right back, and I'll help you watch. *Hobbles off.*

SIMEON: All right, Anna. *Begins pacing back and forth, looking down, and talking slowly to himself.* Ah, how I long to see the Child. I'll warn the young couple about Herod's wicked plan. But maybe God has already warned them. Maybe it's like Anna says, and God will send them down to Egypt. Egypt would be a good place to hide from Herod... *Voice trails off.*

Mary and Joseph enter from right stage. She carries the Christ Child. Joseph has a cage in which there are two young pigeons. They come to Simeon, but he is so lost in his thoughts that he does not notice them until Joseph speaks.
Background Scripture: Luke 2:25-38.

JOSEPH: Sir?

Jolted out of his reverie, Simeon turns around abruptly.

SIMEON: You startled me!

JOSEPH: Sir, we've come to make the Law of Moses sac-- *Recognizes Simeon.*
Why you're the Honorable Simeon that I met in Bethlehem! I didn't recognize you at first!

Simeon recognizes Joseph and becomes so excited that, at first, he can scarcely speak.

SIMEON: It's you! You-- You-- You're from Nazareth. *Hobbles over to see the Child.* Ah, the Child! The Holy Child! The Redeemer promised by God!

MARY: *Pulling back blanket* Yes, he is the Holy Child.

JOSEPH: We've named him JESUS.

SIMEON: *Ignoring Joseph's remark* Let me hold him! Let me hold him in my arms!

Takes child, looks down at him, speaks with utmost awe.

O, blessed little Child from heaven! You are our long-promised Redeemer! The Saviour! The Lord's Christ!

God has sent you, like a bright light, to lighten the way for the Gentiles and to be the glory of his people Israel!

Simeon looks up, to pray. Mary and Joseph step aside.

"Lord, now let me thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

"For my eyes have seen thy Salvation,

"Which you have prepared before the face of all people!"

Simeon looks down again and smiles at the Child as Mary and Joseph talk to each other.

MARY: Joseph, did you hear the things this devout man said?

JOSEPH: Yes! I'm amazed. God has revealed much to him.

SIMEON: *Handing child back to Mary* The blessings of the LORD our God be upon you both!

JOSEPH: Thank you, Honorable Simeon.

SIMEON: *To Mary.* Young mother, many shall fall and many shall rise again in Israel because of this Child sent by God. There will be griefs and sorrows. The Child is a sign from God, but some will speak against him. The thoughts of many hearts will be revealed, and a sword shall pierce through your own soul also. The Lord of Hosts will--

Simeon interrupts himself as he sees Anna coming in.

Anna! Anna! Here's the Child! Come and see Him!

Anna tries to hurry. Mary goes to meet her and shows her the Christ Child.

ANNA: *With awe* O, look at His little face! It shines like a star.

That strange new star we saw in the sky was the fulfillment of prophecy.

To Child You, little Bright and Morning Star, are the fulfillment of promise. God's promise. *Cf. Revelation 22:16b.*

Anna pauses, smiles again at the Child and leaves Him reluctantly. She speaks to Simeon with normal enthusiasm.

Simeon, I must hurry! I must go and "speak of Him to all them that look for redemption." I must go and tell all of Jerusalem!

Anna leaves, using her cane to hurry.

SIMEON: Yes, Anna! *Calling, after Anna is some distance away.* Tell them the Messiah has come! *Turns to Mary and Joseph.* Come, bring the Child. Bring the doves, and I will show you the way to go.

Simeon leads the way to exit on right stage. He stops. Mary and Joseph walk on.

Walk this way, on through the courtyard, and you will find the place.

Simeon turns around, walks into inner prayer room, lifts eyes to pray.

Lord, I have seen my Redeemer. I'm ready now, to see Death.

Simeon's head falls suddenly, to indicate his dying. The three angels accompanied by Death Angel come.

3RD ANGEL: Simeon, God sent the Death Angel with us this time.

Death Angel takes Simeon's hand, starts leading him away. Others follow.

CURTAIN, END OF PLAY

[Return to the Jewell Ellen Smith Home Page](#)