

Christmas Comes To Bethlehem Again



ADRIAN

Paul's Copy

A Two-act Play By Betty Honeywell

Setting: Modern Bethlehem in Israel.

The scenes alternate between the home and the shop of Benjamin Cohen, Jewish dealer in wood carvings and curios from the Holy Land.

What the play is about:

In all his 70 years, Isaac Cohen has never read a New Testament. He is a careful student of the Torah and has devoutly reared his family according to Jewish traditions. However, into his son's wood carving shop comes Mr. Stewart, a Christian businessman, who asks Isaac to carve for him a figure of Christ as the Good Shepherd, as a gift for his children. This is a difficult assignment for Isaac to accept, for he regards Jesus as an imposter and a blasphemer. But he takes the work and also a New Testament from Mr. Stewart, to investigate the character of Jesus. As a result of comparing the life of Jesus with Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah, the old Jewish grandfather sees the truth and welcomes his Saviour.

Isaac faces opposition from the Rabbi in his synagogue, and lack of understanding from his son Ben. But he finds in his young grandson David an eagerness to read the New Testament and talk with him about Jesus. The boy also comes to believe in Him.

Characters:

DAVID COHEN: a young Jewish lad, between 9 and 12

ISAAC COHEN: David's grandfather, a skilled wood-carver

BENJAMIN COHEN: David's father, the shop manager

REBEKKAH COHEN: David's mother

ROGER STEWART: a Christian businessman, a traveler in Israel

RABBI MEIR: head of the local synagogue

CHORUS OR CHOIR

CHARACTERIZATION

The play focuses on DAVID and his grandfather, ISAAC COHEN. The boy should be bright and attractive—his age is not so important as his ability to memorize and act. He should be dressed much like an ordinary boy with perhaps the addition of a small brimless cotton or wool skullcap (like a "beanie"). The old man could wear one, too, perhaps over a white wig; and he should have a long white beard. His clothes can be simple work clothes. To choose the right character for this part is important, also. If a tall boy is used, rather than an adult, he will have to stoop slightly and disguise his voice.

BEN COHEN should give the impression of a sleek, polished salesman whose main interest is money. He should be made up to appear dark-complexioned and somewhat stout. His wife REBEKKAH should wear a long black dress, or she may be dressed stylishly in western clothes. She also should appear dark-skinned, and plump.

ROGER STEWART is the typical tourist, with cameras and a brief case. He should act nervous and exaggerate the displeasure he feels.

The RABBI should wear a black suit and broad-brimmed black hat. A dark choir robe and a turban or skullcap will do if a suit and hat are not available.

STAGING

Since the scenes alternate between the home and the shop, it would be well to divide the stage in two and pull the curtain so that only the half which you are using in a particular scene will be seen. (See sketch on page 6.) The last part of the final scene can be played in front of the curtain, with paper stars pinned on the curtain and the lights lowered to suggest nighttime. A spotlight on the characters would be helpful in understanding what they say.

THE HOME SCENE

Make this a simple living room with a couple of chairs. A bright wall hanging or some characteristically Jewish object of art will add interest.

THE SHOP SCENE

This also can be very simple, with the men pointing to objects just out of view of the audience, rather than holding carvings in their hands. A glass showcase with some art objects in it would help give the idea of a shop. However, the only vital props are a table and chair for the manager, with a nameplate on the table.

A picture of Christ as The Good Shepherd should not be hard to find. The completed carving of Christ which Isaac "makes" can be wrapped by the time the audience sees it.

THE CURTAIN

A curtain is very useful in this play. But if you do not have one, the home scene and the shop scene can be side by side, as if the shop is at the front of the home and closed during the home scenes, and vice versa.

It is suggested that the curtain be closed for the final dialogue following Scene 3, Act II (see STAGING, above). If you do not have a curtain, simply lower the lights. Push the props back a little from the edge of the stage to give David and Isaac room to walk. Or, they may walk at floor level in front of the platform or stage.

All these ideas are simply suggestions. Your own ideas may work out much better. Don't let props, costumes, curtain, or lack of them, be of primary importance. They are merely aids to understanding the story. Concentrate on getting the message of the play across to your audience.

PROPERTIES NEEDED FOR EACH SCENE

ACT I

Scene 1: Living room of Benjamin Cohen's home

Props: chair, hassock or footstool, table, knitting or sewing materials for Mrs. Cohen. Sofa, rug, art objects from Israel would make attractive room, but are not essential.

Scene 2: Cohen's Gift Shop

Props: placard reading "Cohen's Gift Shop—Wood carving our specialty" set on a flannelgraph easel for audience to see; desk or table and chair with a nameplate, "Benjamin I. Cohen, Manager," chisel and hammer. A glass showcase with art objects and some wood carvings would be interesting.

Scene 3: Nighttime in Cohen's home

Props: table and straight chair, large candle or small lamp, two copies of large old Bibles, pajamas for David.

ACT II

Scene 1: Cohen's Gift Shop

Props: 2 straight chairs or stools, New Testament.

Scene 2: Cohen's Gift Shop

Props: stool, tools, wood carving to approximate figure of The Good Shepherd, leather-bound New Testament, wrapping for the wood carving.

Scene 3: Christmas Eve in the Cohen home.

Props: same as Scene 1, with the addition of a lamp. Following Scene 3: rock, stump, log, or low stool for Isaac and David to rest on.

MUSIC

The music can be sung by a choir or by a variety of musicians. These persons may be hidden, or they may stand in front of the curtain or the stage. Suggested songs are:

1. Before the play starts: *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Since this is so well known, it might be played as an instrumental or orchestral number. It sets the place and focuses attention on the town before the play begins.
2. At the intermission: Negro Spiritual, *We Didn't Know Who You Was*. This may be a solo or another class in the Sunday School may participate in a musical way. But this activity should not detract from the ongoing of the story.
3. During the last scene: *Hark, the Herald Angel: Sing!* This may be sung by a hidden chorus.
4. *Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne*. This may be sung by the chorus or by a combination of a solo and the chorus, before David's final statement in the last scene.
5. Invitation song (if desired), such as *Have You Any Room for Jesus?*

Christmas Comes to Bethlehem Again

ACT I

Scene 1: Living room of Benjamin Cohen's home
(Rebekkah Cohen is sitting in a chair knitting or sewing. David sits on a hassock or stool at her feet.)

DAVID: Mother, why don't we have a Christmas Day like Ali and Peter and their families do? It sounds like such fun!

MOTHER: Well, my dear Davey, we have Hanukkah. Isn't that just as good?

DAVID: Well, I suppose so. But I sort of feel like I'm missing out on something, especially after what happened today.

MOTHER: What happened, son?

DAVID: Well, I was walking by the Church of the Nativity this morning and I noticed a Canadian family. I thought I'd make a little pocket money, so I offered to show them around the church. I know it well, Mother. So I showed them St. Jerome's room and St. Catherine's Church. Then I took them to the Grotto of the Nativity. When we came to the spot where the silver star is—you know, the place where Jesus was born—

MOTHER: Yes. I know it well. What happened there?

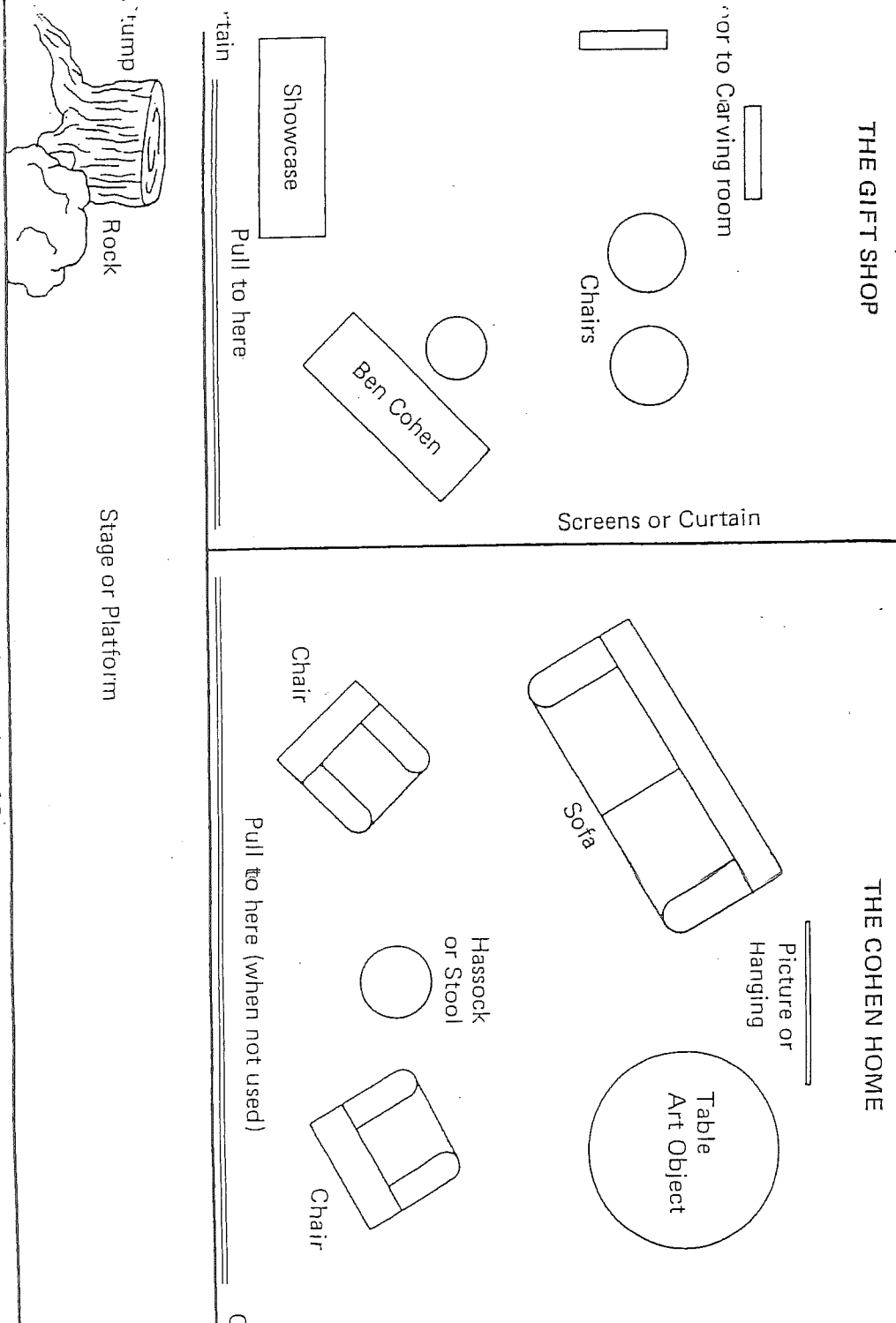
DAVID: Their little girl put her hand in the hole and touched the stone beneath and started to cry.

MOTHER: How strange!

DAVID: I thought so, too. I was afraid I had done something wrong. But when I looked at the mother there were tears in her eyes, too. She looked at me and tried to explain. "Marcie loves Jesus very much, David. She can hardly believe that she is touching the spot where His manger might have stood."

MOTHER: What happened then?

DAVID: Marcie turned to me, smiling through her tears. She said, "David, do you love Jesus, too?" I didn't know what to answer, so I quickly led them off to another spot. Do we love Jesus, Mother? Jesus was a Jew like we are, wasn't He?



MOTHER: Yes, Jesus was a Jew; but . . . perhaps you had better ask your grandfather about that sometime, David. Now, why don't I tell you the story about Hanukkah, the Feast of Lights.

DAVID: Oh, yes! Do, Mother. I like that story.

MOTHER: It started back in the days of that evil Roman ruler, Antiochus IV. The Romans determined to force the Jews to give up their religion. They seized the great Temple in Jerusalem and desecrated it. They even offered a dirty sow on the altar of the living God! Then God raised up a brave family in the little town of Modin, called the Maccabees. Mattathias, the father, was a priest. In righteous anger he killed the Roman who commanded him to desecrate the altar. That started a revolt. His son, Judas Maccabee, was able to raise an army, and finally retook the city of Jerusalem. One of the first things the free people did was to cleanse the Temple.

DAVID: I like that part! May I tell the rest, Mother?

MOTHER: Of course, Davey.

DAVID: In the Temple they found a small jar of oil—only enough to keep the eternal light before the holy Ark burning for one day. But by a miracle the one jar of oil kept the holy light burning for eight days and nights. That is why we have eight days of holiday at Hanukkah.

FATHER: *(entering)* Good boy! You know the story well. Those Maccabees were real fighters! They refused to give up. We have a heritage of which we can be proud, David. Maybe this year you can be the one to light the first candle of the Menorah. Would you like that?

DAVID: Oh, yes, Father!

FATHER: We shall see; but now, isn't it bedtime for a ten-year-old who has school tomorrow?

MOTHER: Yes, indeed it is. I guess we got carried away with our stories. Goodnight, David.

Scene 2: Benjamin Cohen's shop
(David enters with Mr. Stewart. Ben comes to greet him.)

DAVID: This is my father's shop, sir.

STEWART: Thank you, David.

BEN: Good morning! Come in! Come in! I have many beautiful carvings.

STEWART: Thank you; I will. I'm looking for a very special Christmas present for the greatest little family in the world. David told me that you have a very fine carver.

BEN: The best in town, you'll pardon me for saying so. He is my father.

STEWART: How fortunate I am! Do you have any of his work here?

BEN: A few pieces. Most of his are made to fill orders, and I can't keep a stock on hand.

STEWART: This one is the boy David with his harp, isn't it? Lovely work. The facial expression is exceptionally good. What I had in mind was a carving of The Good Shepherd—Jesus Christ. Something like this picture *(picking up one)*.

BEN: Let me call my father. He will be able to tell you if he can do it or not. Just a moment.

(Ben goes out and returns with his father, chisel in hand.)

BEN: My father's English is somewhat limited, but I will translate if he does not understand. Isaac Cohen, Mr. . . .

STEWART: Roger Stewart. Happy to meet you, sir. What I have seen of your work is very skillful.

ISAAC: Thank you! And as we say in Hebrew, Shalom! Peace! You have a picture to show me?

STEWART: Yes, this is the figure I would like you to carve. But I would like to have the Christ more rugged-looking, with hard-working hands; and the face should be more Jewish and manly . . . but there should be tenderness as well.

ISAAC: *(shaking his head)* I don't know if I can do it—the face, that will be very hard. Ben . . .

BEN: I think what my father means is . . . you know, He is a Jew. To us Jews, Jesus of Nazareth was an imposter, even a blasphemer, because He claimed to be God. What my father is saying is that he will have to fight against himself to make that face say what you want it to say. He has never attempted a likeness of Jesus.

STEWART: I see . . . I think I understand. Mr. Cohen, have you ever read the description of the Messiah in the book of Isaiah?

ISAAC: You mean chapter 53? Other Christians have told me that describes Messiah, but it cannot be. Messiah will come in glory and power to reign as our King. He cannot be the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. No, I think that must represent our poor, suffering nation.

STEWART: Did you ever consider that Messiah could have been pictured twice, in two different historical settings? The first time He appeared, He came to suffer for the sins of the world. That's what we see predicted in Isaiah 53. The second time He comes to earth, it will be as a King, a righteous Ruler.

ISAAC: *(brightening)* I never considered that. Hmmm . . . That would clear up a lot of problems—things I never could understand.

BEN: My father is quite a student of the Torah, Mr. Stewart.

STEWART: I guessed as much. May I suggest that you read Isaiah 53 alongside the record of the sufferings of Christ in the Gospels and see how closely they resemble each other?

ISAAC: But, I have never *touch*ed a New Testament!
 BEN: And his English, as I have said, is quite deficient.
 STEWART: Very fortunately, I picked up this Hebrew New Testament at a Bible bookstore this morning. I'll leave it with you, Isaac. I'd like you to read John 10, also. It describes the Good Shepherd and might help you to feel the emotion I want in the carving.
 ISAAC: Your children, will they worship this carving?
 STEWART: Oh, no! We will put it in their bedroom and it will remind them that Jesus takes care of them. It will help them to love Him when they remember how kind He is.
 ISAAC: I see, I see. I will do my best, sir.
 BEN: When do you need this, Mr. Stewart?
 STEWART: I'll be leaving in about 10 days. Do you think it could be finished by December 23?
 BEN: Yes, I think so. I don't want to promise that you will really be satisfied with the face. You understand the problem.
 STEWART: I do. And I'm willing to take the risk. I'll be asking God to give you help, Mr. Cohen. Good-bye. Good-bye, David.
 ISAAC, BEN, DAVID: Good-bye.

Scene 3: Nighttime in Cohen's home
(Isaac, with a candle, is poring over old copies of the Old Testament and the New Testament in Hebrew. David comes in, in pajamas.)
 DAVID: *(rubbing his eyes)* Grandpa, what are you doing? Isn't it late at night?
 ISAAC: Yes, son, go back to bed; Grandpa is busy.
 DAVID: Is this the book Mr. Stewart gave you?
 ISAAC: Yes, it's the New Testament. I've never read it before. Interesting, very interesting!
 DAVID: Does it tell about Jesus?
 ISAAC: Why do you ask, David?
 DAVID: Today I asked Mother whether we love Jesus or not. She said that I should ask you. Do you love Jesus, Grandpa?
 ISAAC: That is a hard question to answer. I always thought I hated Him. I thought He was an imposter, posing as God when He was only a man, claiming to be our Messiah. But now I'm beginning to wonder. I do not know, David. Please go to bed, lad. I must find out. When I do, I will tell you.
 DAVID: Goodnight, Grandpa.

INTERMISSION

ACT II

Scene 1: Cohen's Gift Shop
(David and his grandfather sit at the back of the shop. The Rabbi enters.)
 RABBI: Shalom, Shalom, Isaac! Your son tells me that you want to talk with me about something very important.
 ISAAC: Shalom, Rabbi Meir! Yes, I have some questions for you. Have you ever read this?
 RABBI: The New Testament! Indeed not! This book is pure poison. Where did you get it? I shall tear it and burn it! *(grabs for it)*
 ISAAC: No, Rabbi, you shall not. It belongs to a friend of mine. I have not given you permission to touch it.
 RABBI: I am sorry; perhaps I was a bit rash. But you do understand, don't you, the dangers of a book of heresy?
 ISAAC: I am not a child. I have studied the Scriptures for more years than you have seen the sun. My questions is, why did our wise Jewish scholars fail to recognize that Jesus was our Messiah?
 RABBI: Blasphemy! Isaac, you have lost your senses. I shall have you excommunicated from the synagogue if you continue this behavior!
 BEN: *(entering)* What's all the fuss, Rabbi? Who is going to excommunicate my father? Of course, you wouldn't remember, but he helped to build the synagogue with his own hands.
 RABBI: You are talking to a Rabbi, Ben. Your own business may suffer for this, too.
 ISAAC: Intimidation. Name-calling. Is that all I get from one who is supposed to be our spiritual leader? If you have never read the New Testament, how can you hope to know what it says? I have spent the whole night poring over it, comparing the prophets' predictions with the events in the life of Jesus. As I read, it was as if scales fell off my eyes. Our Messiah came, and we did not see Him because we were blind!
 RABBI: You will teach the Rabbis, will you, old wood-carver! Perhaps he is losing his mind, Ben. Better have him see a doctor.
 ISAAC: My mind has never been more clear. But to think that we treated Him so shamefully. "He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities. . . ." That's from our own Torah!
 BEN: Perhaps that's enough, Father; the Rabbi is upset.
 RABBI: That's putting it mildly, Mr. Ben Cohen. You can be sure I will not keep quiet about this either. *(He leaves.)*

ISAAC: I only asked a few simple questions. Bigotry is so blind. I was blind myself for 70 years. Thank God, I am beginning to see the light before I have to go and see my Maker! (*He goes to his room.*)

BEN: (*pacing and talking to himself*) A fine mess to clean up! I'm sorry that Stewart ever put his face in my shop. The old man will be hard to move once he's convinced. The Rabbi could make it ugly for us at the synagogue . . . and even in our business. What shall I do? What shall I do?

Scene 2: Cohen's Gift Shop

(*David and his grandfather sit at the back of the shop.*)

DAVID: Grandpa! Your carving is finished!

ISAAC: Almost, son. A bit more sanding here.

DAVID: It's really nice.

ISAAC: Thank you, David. Do you remember the question you asked me in the middle of the night?

DAVID: Oh, yes—about Jesus. Do you know the answer now?

ISAAC: I think you can see the answer if you look carefully at the face of my carving.

DAVID: See it? (*He takes the carving.*) Yes, I think I do. His eyes are kind; His arms are strong; His hands, gentle. You do love Him, don't you, Grandpa?

ISAAC: I do, David—at last (*wipes his eyes*). For years I have used His name as a curse word. I wonder if He can forgive me?

STEWART: (*standing in the doorway*) Forgive me for eavesdropping. I couldn't help hearing. Yes, I know He will forgive you. He forgave me, and I was a miserable sinner. We read in His Word, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

ISAAC: Ah! That is good news you have brought me. This little Book has opened my eyes to so many things. I shall always be grateful to you.

STEWART: I want you to keep it. I can see you are making good use of it.

ISAAC: Oh, thank you! It has helped me with this, too (*holds out carving*).

STEWART: (*taking the carving*) The Good Shepherd! It is perfect! Only the real Person could be better, sir. You gave Him the manliness, the Jewishness, the tenderness . . . I think you caught His spirit and translated it in olive wood. I cannot adequately pay you for work of this kind. (*Ben enters.*)

ISAAC: You shall not pay me. It has been transformed into a work of love. If your children learn to love Him more because of this work of mine, I shall be fully repaid.

STEWART: (*thoughtfully*) I shall pay the amount on which we agreed—it will help with the cost of the wood and upkeep around here (*winks at Ben*). But the love you poured into it, that I will receive as a gift and pass it on to my children. That sounds fair enough, Father.

BEN:

STEWART: And as my Christmas gift to your grandson, I picked up this little leather-bound English New Testament. It is in simple English, so I think he can understand it. David, would you like to have this?

DAVID: Oh, yes! I would. Does it have the stories about Jesus, like the one you gave to Grandfather?

STEWART: Yes, and a whole lot more—stories of Peter and Paul and many other heroes of the faith. (*To Ben:*) You do not mind, sir?

BEN: (*reluctantly*) Well, he no doubt will hear the stories from his Grandfather anyway. I guess it will not hurt him.

STEWART: I must go now. My plane leaves from Lod Airport in a couple of hours. Isaac, thank you so much. I feel that you are now my brother in the faith. Let me leave you a parting word from John's Gospel: "But to all who received Him (Jesus Christ) He gave the right to become children of God." All anyone needs to do is to trust Him and He will save them from their sins. Are you willing to do that, Isaac?

ISAAC: Very willing! In fact, I think that is what I did when the truth that He is our Messiah came clear to me. But I have very much to learn.

STEWART: The Holy Spirit will teach you as you read God's Word. Still, our knowledge will not be complete till we see Him when He comes again.

ISAAC: God speed the day!

STEWART: Good-bye! Shalom! We shall meet again—if not down here, up there!

Scene 3: Christmas Eve in the Cohen home

(*David sits on the hassock and his grandfather in the chair.*)

DAVID: Grandpa, now that you and I have discovered that Jesus is our Messiah, how shall we celebrate His birthday?

ISAAC: I guess I hadn't thought about that. How do you think we should do it, David?

DAVID: Well, Mother and Father are not very happy about what has happened to us. I heard them talking when they thought I was asleep. So I don't suppose we can convince them to celebrate with us.

ISAAC: Perhaps not, at least not yet. The Rabbi is watching them quite closely, too.

DAVID: Yet, I'm sure Mother at least is interested. I caught her looking at my New Testament the other day.

ISAAC: I fear that my son is mainly interested in money, but God has strange ways of working with men.

DAVID: Yes. My friend Ali—he's an Arab Christian, you know—said that a group of Christians from many countries will gather in the shepherds' fields tonight to read the story of Christmas from the Gospels, sing carols, and pray for Christians around the world.

ISAAC: Christians . . . I always looked upon them as enemies. I was told by my father that they blamed us for the death of Jesus. They have shown a lot of hate towards Jews in the name of Christianity.

DAVID: Maybe not *all* Christians hate Jews. Mr. Stewart doesn't. My friends Ali and Peter like me.

ISAAC: You are right, David. Come to think of it, we have had many Christian customers who have been kind. I suppose if they really love our Messiah, we can love them, can't we, David?

DAVID: I think so. Maybe Jesus will help us. He loved everybody in the whole world. I read that in my New Testament this morning. Could we go to the shepherds' fields, Grandpa? You're not too tired?

ISAAC: No, I'm fine. Let's go. We can stay at the edge of the crowd. *(Curtain is pulled and the two characters walk in front of it.)*

DAVID: Just think, Grandpa, the shepherds might have been sitting right here when they heard the angels. *(They stop to rest.)*

ISAAC: That's so. They must have been afraid. Listen, I hear singing now! *(Chorus sings, Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.)*

DAVID: It's the Christians! They've started already.

ISAAC: How beautiful! And to think, I've lived in Bethlehem for more than 50 years . . . and this is my *first* Christmas!

DAVID: Grandpa, I wish I could have run with the shepherds to see the baby Jesus in the manger. I'll bet I could have reached the stable first! But, I wonder why God chose such a poor place for His Son to be born. It must have been smelly with the sheep and donkeys and oxen.

ISAAC: Perhaps it wasn't God's choosing at all, David. Perhaps it was the blindness and stupidity of men. Any innkeeper would have slept in the stable himself if he could have made enough money. *Joseph and Mary were poor. Oh, it was shabby treatment mankind gave the Son of God, very shabby. First we gave Him a cold, smelly stable; then He had to spend nights out under the stars because He had no home. Finally, we spat on Him, mocked Him, and put Him to death, using the most cursed method known to men—slow, torturous, inhuman. Oh, Jehovah God! Can*

You forgive us for treating your Son that way? *(weeps, falling on his knees)*

DAVID: Grandpa, listen to the words of the song they are singing! *(Chorus sings stanzas 2, 4, 5 of, Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne.)* Wouldn't it be great if Jesus would come to Bethlehem again on Christmas!

The End