

Dateline: Bethlehem

Reactions to Jesus Birth

CHARACTERS: 9 M, 3F, 3 either; doubling possible

COSTUMES: Biblical and modern day

PROPS: see script

SETTING: TV studio

RUN TIME: 22 minutes

Cast (doubling possible)

TV Host
Reporter
Reporter 2
Gamaliel
Anna

Antonius, a centurion
Josiah, a shepherd
Ben, a young shepherd
Ben's friend, non speaking
Mary

Joseph
General Joab
Herod
Woman from the East
Simeon

Stage is split into two, each part with separate lighting. Scenes alternate between live interviews by a reporter being "played" as clips and a studio where three commentators are seated behind a table or on stools to be interviewed by the TV Host.

Lights illuminate only the portion of the stage where action is taking place. Actors in opposite scene remain frozen during the other scene and come back to life when the light is on them.

Scene 1: The Panel

TV HOST: Tonight we bring some commentary on the events in the capital district. With us we have Gamaliel, a teacher of Jewish law, a man well respected for his learning. Anna, daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She'll be commenting from a woman's perspective on these events. Lastly we have Antonius, a Roman centurion and right hand man of Quirinius, the governor of Syria. He'll be commenting from an outsider's point of view on this matter.

First we'd like to show some clips of past news broadcasts covering the events.

Scene 2: Shepherds

REPORTER: Viewers, we are live in Bethlehem bringing you breaking news of a savior's birth. I'm here with Josiah. Josiah, you work in the area, right. *(Behind Josiah and the reporter and 2 child shepherds, waving into the camera and trying to insert themselves into the scene.)*

JOSIAH: Yes, I'm a shepherd. I keep watch over the temple flocks.

REPORTER: How did you find out about the baby?

JOSIAH: An angel of the Lord appeared to us. There was a light like the glory of the Lord

REPORTER: Have you ever seen the glory of the Lord?

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JOSIAH: No but I imagine this was it with the angels and all.

REPORTER: What did the angel say?

JOSIAH: Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord

REPORTER: And by town of David he meant....?

JOSIAH: Bethlehem. It was always known as David's town. Then the angel said 'This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger'

REPORTER: A manger? A feed bin for animals?

JOSIAH: Didn't you think that odd – the Savior of the world lying in a feed trough?

JOSIAH: I was just overwhelmed by the whole thing and didn't really analyze it at the time. I mean, first we were terrified with the appearance of the angel – oh, and there was an entire host of angels backing him. A huge number.

REPORTER: How did you feel? What thoughts were going through your mind?

JOSIAH: As I said, first terrified, then I just wanted to praise God right along with the angels. They were saying "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

REPORTER: Are the angels still out there singing?

JOSIAH: No they went back to heaven. So I suggested we go to Bethlehem and see this thing that had happened, which the Lord had told us about.

REPORTER: *(turning to the kids finally. They become tongue tied and camera shy)* Let me get a comment here. What's your name?

BEN: *(deer caught in the headlights)* Benjamin.

REPORTER: What happened when you got to the stable?

BEN: Um... I didn't go. I had to stay with the sheep.

REPORTER: OK Josiah, what happened at the stable?

JOSIAH: We hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby just like the angel said. After paying our respects we went to friends in town and told them the good news.

REPORTER: How did they react?

JOSIAH: Amazed. We have been looking so long for a Messiah...

REPORTER: So your fear turned into praise?

JOSIAH: Yes.

REPORTER: Thank you. I see the baby's mother, Mary, is available for an interview. Let's just pop over there. (*Lights out. Shepherds exit and Mary and Joseph get in place*)

Scene 3: Comments of the Shepherds

TV HOST: Gamaliel, what do you see in the shepherds reaction to the news of Jesus' birth?

GAMALIEL: Fear is only natural, at first, but when they hear the news it quickly turned into praise. That in turn led to witnessing to others.

TV HOST: No one likes to keep good news to themselves.

GAMALIEL: Here were some men, who by the very nature of their work were hardly able to keep to the laws of Moses regarding ceremonial washing and all. Yet, when the news came, they praised God and shared it with others.

TV HOST: Don't you think it rather odd that the news didn't come to the religious leaders first?

GAMALIEL: Yes and no. Shepherds have always been close to God's heart. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all shepherds. God trained Moses to lead with a 40 year stint as a shepherd. But the most famous shepherd, David, was not only a man after God's own heart but he was the shepherd king and forefather of the Messiah.

TV HOST: So you see some historical reasoning for shepherds to hear the news first.

GAMALIEL: Yes. I do.

TV HOST: Let's move to the next segment of this first broadcast, where Mary and Joseph, the parents of the baby, are interviewed. (*GAMALIEL waves A over and speaks quietly off camera and mic*) I stand corrected on a technicality – the mother of the baby and her husband.

Scene 4: Mary and Joseph

REPORTER: Ma'am. Congratulations.

MARY: Thank you.

REPORTER: How does it feel to be the mother of the savior of the world?

MARY: I'm treasuring every moment.

REPORTER: Here's the father now. Why are you in a stable with the Savior of the World?

JOSEPH: I'm not the baby's father. I'm just Mary's husband.

REPORTER: Who is the father?

JOSEPH: God. Like Isaiah prophesied, a virgin shall conceive.

REPORTER: That's impossible.

MARY: Nothing is impossible with God.

REPORTER: So you are claiming this child is half mortal and half divine?

JOSEPH: No, Jesus is 100% God and 100% man.

REPORTER: Do you think people are going to buy this story?

JOSEPH: To be honest I didn't buy it until an angel visited me. I had intended to divorce Mary quietly. But after talking to the angel I reconsidered. The angel said not to be afraid to take her as my wife. We were to name the baby Jesus because he would save the people from their sins. He'd be called Immanuel or "God with us."

REPORTER: So why a stable?

JOSEPH: There was no room in the inn.

REPORTER: (*fiddling with ear piece.*) I think we're going to cut to the palace and an interview with one of King Herod's people.

Scene 5: Commentary Mary and Joseph

TV HOST: Let's start with you, Anna. You actually met Mary, is that correct?

ANNA: Yes. They brought Jesus to the temple on the 8th day of his birth for circumcision.

TV HOST: How did you happen to be in the right place at the right time?

ANNA: I'm an 84 year old prophetess that lives in the temple. I spend my days and nights worshipping, praying and fasting. Being a widow for these past years I can do that.

TV HOST: As a woman, how do you see Mary?

ANNA: I see a woman full of faith. She had the most to lose here. As an unwed mother, she was in a position to lose the respect of her family, friends, and the community. She could have lost her betrothed husband and had nothing.

GAMALIEL: You see under Jewish law Joseph had the right not only to divorce her. He could have had her brought up on charges that would have led to her being stoned to death as an adulterer.

TV HOST: Do you think she had second thoughts during her pregnancy?

ANNA: It is hard to say but I doubt it. God had confirmed to her all he said not just with the angel Gabriel's visit but also with words from her own relative – Elizabeth. Now Elizabeth wasn't as old as I am but she was well past her child bearing years. An angel visits her husband, promising a baby. She becomes pregnant. The baby inside her leaps for joy when Mary enters.

GAMALIEL: Throughout our Jewish history barren and even elderly women having children was a sign of great things. Sarah was 90 when she had Isaac. Rebekah, Isaac's wife, was barren for years as was Jacob's wife, Rachel. Samuel and Samson, two outstanding judges had been born to childless women.

ANTONIUS: Even to an outsider, Elizabeth's pregnancy is worth note.

TV HOST: What about Joseph, what do you see happening in his mind?

ANTONIUS: From the viewpoint of an outsider, I see a man of action who does what needs to be done even if it doesn't go along with popular opinion. In that regard he reminds me a bit of our Caesar. Julius Caesar had no male heirs so he adopted one and did all he could to see that heir succeed.

GAMALIEL: I see that the word of God leads to reconsideration. King David had in mind to build the temple. But when the word of God came to him through Nathan the prophet that he was NOT to build the temple, he submitted to God's will. Here we have Joseph, a direct descendent of David, doing the same thing.

TV HOST: How so.

GAMALIEL: He had in mind to put Mary aside but reconsidered when the word of the Lord came to him through the angel Gabriel.

ANNA: He had a servant's heart, just like Mary. You have to remember Mary's words to the Angel: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Mary's submissive faith led to trust.

TV HOST: Let's watch another clip of Herod's reaction to the news

Scene 6: Herod

REPORTER 2: I'm live at King Herod's palace with General Joab. General, how's the king taking the news?

JOAB: Not well, I'm afraid. He's pretty jealous of his throne.

REPORTER 2: I remember back when he suspected some family members were vying for power. Didn't he have some of them executed?

JOAB: Yes. King Herod will not tolerate treason. He... *(HEROD bursts into the scene, shoves JOAB out of the way and grabs the mic)*

HEROD: *(Emotional and forceful)* This is your king. If any of you know where this baby is, report it to me immediately. *(Starting to catch himself and school his emotions, gets syrupy sweet)* That's because I too want to worship him.

REPORTER 2: You aren't concerned that this Jesus could be a rival king?

HEROD: *(lying through his teeth)* Of course not. I am secure in my wealth and power, in my luxurious lifestyle. *(getting firmer)* I'm in control here and intend to stay in control. So if any of you viewers have any information on this baby, drop by the palace. You will be richly rewarded. *(getting a bit harsh)* And if you happen to see some strange Magi types from the east, I'd like information on them as well. *(Hands back the mic and stomps off dragging Joab behind him)*

Scene 7: Commentary on Herod

TV HOST: Let's start with you, Antonius. What do you see happening here?

.ANTONIUS: A man afraid of losing his throne. His reaction when the Magi failed to return shows us how deep his fear ran.

ANNA: *(with heartfelt sympathy)* The slaughter of all those innocent babies.

ANTONIUS: He didn't just kill newborns. His orders included those up to two years of age.

TV HOST: Any speculation why?

ANTONIUS: Obviously he didn't want to take any chances. He did know the exact time of the star's appearance. Now this is just my speculation, but I think he might have been trying to eliminate the child of Zechariah and Elizabeth as well.

TV HOST: Did he even know of this child?

GAMALIEL: Probably. Jesus and John were born within months of each other and the news of a priest having a baby at his and his wife's advanced ages would be news. As I said, throughout Israel's history the children of barren women had been movers and shakers.

TV HOST: So people might be anticipating this child to do something out of the ordinary.

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GAMALIEL: Herod called together those of us who were teachers of the law and the chief priests. The subject could have come up. After all, Zechariah's inability to speak for all those months coupled with the unusual naming of the child kept the child a subject of speculation.

TV HOST: What do you mean about the naming?

GAMALIEL: John was still speechless at the child's naming. Elizabeth was insisting he be called John, despite everyone discouraging it since they had no relatives by that name. Elizabeth insisted and Zechariah finally wrote "His name is John". Boom. John can speak. Everyone there remembers that ceremony.

TV HOST: So why would Herod want John executed?

GAMALIEL: It's just speculation but Herod may have been thinking killing them both made his throne more secure.

ANTONIUS: Herod was all about self security. If you notice, Herod pretended to want to worship the child. He met with the Magi secretly to ask what time the star appeared. I think we can see by his actions that self centeredness leads to death.

GAMALIEL: Self centeredness leads to sin, from a religious standpoint.

TV HOST: I think we can agree that selfishness is never a positive trait. Next we're going to play a clip we filmed in secret. The woman is veiled to hide her identity for reasons that will become apparent.

Scene 8: Woman from the East

REPORTER: I understand you have agreed to speak on behalf of your group only if you can remain anonymous. Do you fear for your life?

WOMAN: (*She sounds mysterious and foreign*) No. Not my life. The life of another who is destined to change history. The one foretold.

REPORTER: Tell us what you can about yourself.

WOMAN: I am the wife of a servant of Magi from the east. Our caravan has been following a star.

REPORTER: And the star was leading you to....

WOMAN: The King of the Jews.

REPORTER: King Herod?

WOMAN: No, one far more important than that fox. We came to worship The King of Kings. To bring him our gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

REPORTER: Did you find this King.

WOMAN: Yes. But that is all I can say. The dream forbids more.

REPORTER: What dream? (*WOMAN raises her hand to indicate the interview is over. She draws her veil to make sure her features are concealed*)

Scene 9: Commentary on Woman from the East

TV HOST: The clip is short but give me your impressions. Anna?

ANNA: They traveled hundreds of miles in difficult conditions to worship. I have it easy, living in the temple, but they showed true dedication to worship.

TV HOST: What I'm wondering is how did these astrologers know a star would lead them to the King of Kings?

GAMALIEL: This is pure speculation but I suspect they were descendents of either Daniel or people in Babylon and Persia who worked with him. Daniel was a supervisor who had proven himself and his God superior to theirs time and again.

ANNA: Daniel also had been given visions of the coming times.

GAMALIEL: We'll never know but he might have given orders to watch for signs that were passed down and heeded because of his prominent position as a wise man in two separate empires.

ANTONIUS: The legacy of a man like that could affect generations.

TV HOST: As an outsider as the Easterners were Antonius, what do you notice?

ANTONIUS: They defied King Herod by returning home another way. As foreigners they could have been in some trouble defying a king on his turf had they been caught. They showed great courage.

TV HOST: Wouldn't they have stuck out like sore thumbs and been easy to trace?

ANTONIUS: My governor, Quirinius, had called for a census of the entire Roman world. The place was pretty crowded with people from all over returning to their home towns to register.

ANNA: Plus they were wealthy and wise men. They could have easily arranged for disguises, decoys.

TV HOST: There was some talk about them being warned in a dream as well. Gamaliel?

GAMALIEL: I see another parallel with David. Just a short diversion, if I may?

TV HOST: Alright, but we have one more clip I want to get in and have comments on. Make it short.

GAMALIEL: David was told to build an altar on another man's property to worship God and stop a deadly plague. When the owner offered it to him for free, David refused, saying he would not give an offering that cost him nothing.

TV HOST: And how does this tie in with the Magi from the East?

GAMALIEL: Worship leads to giving. They came not as spectators wanting to view history as it unfolded but as worshippers who wanted to give. It is hard to express love without giving.

ANNA: They gave of their material wealth, which was needed. Mary and Joseph were broke when they came to the temple. All they could afford were two birds, the poor man's sacrifice. God may have provided the means for their escape and support through these Gentiles. But more than the costly gifts we have to bear in mind they gave also a part of themselves because they risked their lives defying Herod.

ANTONIUS: This is true even in Roman culture. Those who worship with words only are at the lowest echelon. Those who give of their possessions are higher up. But it is those who give of their means and their own lives we prize most highly in the republic.

GAMALIEL: I would agree with that. True worship leads to giving of one's means and self.

TV HOST: Let's quickly move to the clip of Simeon in the temple.

Scene 10: Simeon

REPORTER: Simeon, you were one of the first to react to the Christ child in a public religious forum. How did you come to see him?

SIMEON: I had been told by the Holy Spirit that I would not die before I had seen the Lord's Christ. That hope clung to me like a weed to the soil. That day I was moved by the Spirit to go into the temple courts. When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, I knew my hope had come.

REPORTER: What did you do?

SIMEON: I took Jesus in my arms and praised God, saying:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

REPORTER: How did his parents react?

SIMEON: They marveled at what was said about him. I blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

REPORTER: Can you elaborate on that last statement?

SIMEON: The Messiah is to be a suffering servant. His mother will suffer because he does.

Scene 11: Final Commentary

TV HOST: His mother will suffer as he does. That's what Simeon said. Anna, what do you think that means?

ANNA: A mother's heart is bound closely to that of her children.

TV HOST: Antonius, as a Gentile, comment on the reference to Gentiles.

ANTONIUS: The Jews are quite blatant about excluding all non-Jews. The fact that Simeon includes Gentiles shows that this Jesus is someone unique, able to transcend racial and cultural differences.

TV HOST: Gamaliel?

GAMALIEL: I think we see here that hope leads to fulfillment. We all have hopes for the future. When our hopes are grounded in the word of God we can count on them to be fulfilled.

TV HOST: Our time is almost over. From Simeon's reaction we see that hope leads to fulfillment. Let me let each of you make a couple of last comments on what people's reactions to the birth of Christ teaches us. Ladies first.

ANNA: Mary teaches us that faith leads to trust. Joseph teaches us that God's word leads to reconsideration.

ANTONIUS: Herod's reaction teaches us that self centeredness leads to sin and death.

GAMALIEL: The shepherds teach that praise leads to witnessing and the Magi that worship leads to giving.

TV HOST: Thank you all for being on today's show. And we thank you viewers for tuning in. God bless and Good night.