

THE INNKEEPER

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STORY OF THE PLAY

"If that means I have to charge more, so be it! If that means that the poor have to go hungry, too bad!" Those are the unfeeling words of Jonas, an innkeeper in Bethlehem. His inn is full and business is booming, thanks to Caesar's decree. But Jonas' wife, Abigail, and daughter, Deborah, cannot talk him into being a more Christian businessman and helping those less fortunate. Jonas argues he should make all the money he can now for their old age since their son, Reuben, who would have helped take care of them, died much too soon. The way Jonas figures it, God owes him.

But Jonas' attitude changes completely when he meets Joseph, a new father but one wise when it concerns the future life of a son.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 m, 2 w)

JONAS: The innkeeper.

ABIGAIL: Jonas' wife.

DEBORAH: Their daughter.

JOAB: Young rabbi. *

JOSEPH: Carpenter from Nazareth.

ELIAS: A shepherd.

SHEPHERD 2: Another.

SHEPHERD 3: Another.

*Part can be doubled with one of the shepherds.

PROPS

Mixing bowl, bread dough, pitcher of water, tray of dirty dishes, rag to wash table, dishes (bowls, goblets, utensils), loaf of bread, pot of stew, basket of fruit, leather pouch, wineskin, water jug.

SCENE 1

(AT RISE: That morning. ABIGAIL is in the kitchen standing behind a table preparing bread. JONAS enters SR, excitedly.)

JONAS: You should see the people, Abigail!! It is unbelievable! We will soon be full, and it's only early morning! I knew that the decree would help business, but I never imagined there would be this many people! *(HE moves slowly DS looking as if he is deep in thought.)* Let's see...if I sleep three to a room...I can make one and a half times more...and I don't think they would really mind. Plus...*(HE turns to face ABIGAIL, talking to her again as he comes up behind her.)*...I would not have to report it to the tax collector! It would be free and clear! *(HE steps up close behind HER and attempts to embrace her.)* We will be rich!!

ABIGAIL: *(As HE attempts the embrace, SHE gives a flip of her head, moving toward the table UPS. She picks up a pitcher of water.)* My heart goes out to these travelers. Have you seen their faces? They all look so tired! Exhausted! *(SHE slowly returns to the table and sets the pitcher down as she continues to talk.)* I think of all the hardships they have to endure, and I hurt for them! Think of it...having to travel miles from their homes, just to register to be taxed! *(SHE picks up the pitcher and pours a little water into the bowl of flour.)* They have to find food and water with no shelter from the hot sun during the day or from the cold at night. *(SHE works the bread dough. DEBORAH enters SR carrying a tray of dirty dishes. She sets tray on back table and begins to clear it off as she listens to her mother.)* And they are always in danger having to watch for wild animals and thieves.

DEBORAH: *(With sarcasm)* I see we are talking about Papa again! *(SHE turns hurriedly SR trying to leave quickly.)*

JONAS: *(Stepping toward DEBORAH)* And just what did you mean by that remark, young lady?

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DEBORAH: *(SHE is stopped by her FATHER'S voice. She turns toward him looking subdued, but still full of sarcasm.)* You don't know, Papa? I am talking about your practices of overcharging for food and shelter. *(ABIGAIL, sensing the tension, begins to clean her hands off.)* You take advantage of the situation to enrich yourself! *(SHE steps closer to her FATHER until she is directly in front of him. Temper rising)* You don't care about the people, you only care about their money! In my eyes you are like a wolf, a wild wolf waiting for its prey...looking for the best angle of attack! You steal, Papa, from those who can afford to pay the least!!!

ABIGAIL: *(Steps between THEM)* Deborah! He is your father!

JONAS: *(Stares directly at DEBORAH with growing anger)* I don't care? I don't care? I care enough about you and your mother! Look around you...you have a home - -

DEBORAH: *(Interrupts HIM, still angry)* I live in an inn, Papa, with all the other people who are your guests, and I pay my way with the work I do, waiting on tables and helping people get settled in!

JONAS: *(Trying to continue HIS point)* Clothes -

DEBORAH: *(Pulls at HER dress and reveals a patch)* This rag? I'm ashamed to be seen in public in them.

JONAS: *(Beginning to lose control)* Food?

DEBORAH: Sure! Sure! After everyone else has eaten, everyone who can afford to pay, that is!

(ABIGAIL has been standing between THEM watching the confrontation grow. She now turns hurriedly back to the table and finishes fixing the tray.)

JONAS: *(Exploding in anger)* We run a business! We provide a service! *(HE points a finger at DEBORAH and holds it in her face as he talks. She steps back as he gets closer.)* It's only fair that we be rewarded for our labor! If I followed every whim, provided for every beggar, we soon wouldn't have anything for ourselves!

DEBORAH: (*Realizing SHE has pushed too far, looking contrite, lowers her head in subjection*) All they are asking for, Papa, is just enough to sustain their life. (*SHE looks up again into the face of JONAS who is still glaring at her.*) Surely we can afford - -

JONAS: (*Interrupting*) They're freeloaders!!

DEBORAH: (*Still pleading*) No, Papa, they're people!

JONAS: What do you know about business? Do you think I buy feed for the animals with nothing? When the tax collector comes, do you think he cares whether or not I have helped someone? No! It takes money!

DEBORAH: (*Angered again*) And you charged three shekels for a night's lodging before the decree! Now it's five! But, did your costs go up? No! Have taxes increased? Not that I know of! (*Visibly upset, HE grips the sides of the table with both hands, trying to control himself. ABIGAIL has finished the tray and turns toward stage front.*) But you get the extra...and line your purse with it...while people all around us starve!

ABIGAIL: (*SHE steps forward with the tray and hands it to DEBORAH.*) Deborah, enough! Come, you have work to do!

DEBORAH: (*SHE ignores HER MOTHER and continues to talk to JONAS, but with a pleading tone. Jonas still has his back to her.*) All I am saying, Papa, is that we have more than we need. Many of these people who have come are poor. They don't want to be here. Caesar forces them to come! We can help these people! Besides...it's the law!!

JONAS: (*Faces DEBORAH and raises HIS hands above his head in a mocking manner*) "The law"! What law are you speaking of? Roman law?

DEBORAH: No! An even higher law! The Law of God! (*Respectfully SHE begins to recite scripture. SHE turns away from her FATHER toward stage front, assuming an air of authority.*) "The Lord our God is a God of gods, and Lord of lords; a great God; a mighty and an awesome God; who regards not persons...or takes a reward. He executes justice for the fatherless and widow, and loves the sojourner, in giving him food and raiment.

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