

The Innkeeper's Feast

A Celebration of the First Christmas
A Christmas Pageant based on the model of a Madrigal Feast

by Sondra Edwards



INTRODUCTION

The Innkeeper's Feast is a fun and creative alternative to a traditional Christmas pageant. It combines the idea of a madrigal feast with the drama and intrigue of experiencing the first Christmas as a guest of the Innkeeper.

WHAT IS A MADRIGAL FEAST?

A Madrigal Dinner or Madrigal Feast is an American form of dinner theater often held by schools and church groups during the Christmas season. Meant to recreate the feeling of a Renaissance feast, it is set in the Middle Ages and often comedic in nature. The meal is divided into courses, each of which is heralded with a traditional song. A play is performed between the courses or after the main course has been served and a concert of choral music concludes the festivities.

In addition, many madrigal dinners employ roving entertainers, who perform for the guests at their tables alone or in groups. These may be jugglers, poets, beggars, instrumentalists, comedians, or singers. At some shows, the singers will break into small groups and entertain among the audience - a practice known as "wenching".

Although intended to imitate a meal that might have been served during the Middle Ages, the food at a madrigal dinner is often regional and will vary from show to show. (Excerpt from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madrigal_dinner)

You may choose to adapt the directions provided to fit your own situation and inclinations. While the traditional Madrigal feast would serve a boar's head and all the trimmings, the meal suggested in these pages has a more Middle Eastern feel, comprised of foods that might have been eaten at the time of the birth of Jesus. You can, of course, adjust the menu to your own tastes. You may also choose to add entertainment mini-events such as juggling, etc. depending on the gifts and skills of your congregation.

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PREPARATION GUIDE

PROLOGUE

This Prologue may be read by a narrator after guests are seated or printed on a program beside each place setting. If you read this, have the “servants” ready to close the door as you say those words. Use the version on the next page if you plan to put it on a table tent card.

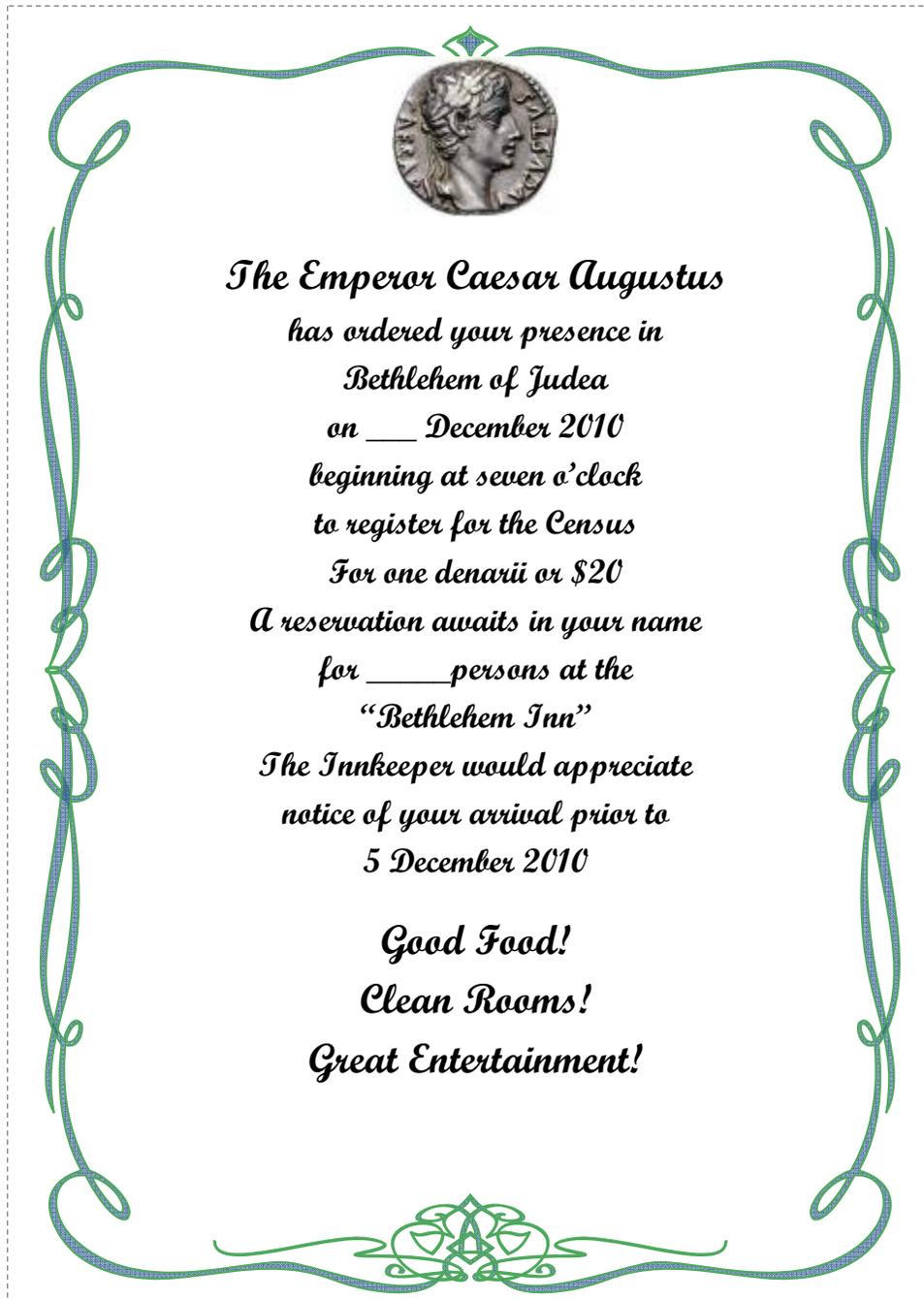
It is dusk. A slight tinge of rosy golden color lingers in the Western sky as darkness settles in over the town of Bethlehem. Usually this town is a lazy little village of the familiar. But tonight it is bustling with the unfamiliar. Hundreds of strangers have arrived to register for the census as commanded by Caesar Augustus. More Roman Soldiers than usual are visible throughout the town.

A few miles outside town are seen the slowly moving silhouettes of a man leading a donkey. Riding the donkey is a woman who appears to be pregnant.

On the edge of town, one of the most respectable Inns in all of Bethlehem has just registered its last guests. The doors close to keep out the brisk night air. All the rooms are full. The Innkeeper is preparing to greet his guests in the dining hall.

Thus the Innkeeper’s Feast begins.....

Cut along dotted line (5x7 inches)



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This play recounts the night of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Though the actual situation, dialogue, and some of the events in the drama are the inventions of the playwright, the historical and cultural details accurately reflect the time and customs of first century Judea.

We do not know the date of the birth of Jesus. The early church thus chose to place its celebration of the Nativity at a traditional time of celebration of other winter feasts.

On December 17, Romans held a feast to Saturn, their god of agriculture. Saturnalia took place just prior to the Winter Solstice, the time of the longest night. It was a riotously merry plea for the sun to return to grace Earth with its warmth and light, and to insure another summer season of good crops.

Thus, Christians, surrounded by the customs of pagan society, shared in the common time of celebration of the time when light overcomes darkness.

Welcome to the Innkeeper's Feast

Inns are life-giving way stations for weary travelers. The law of hospitality decrees that even the poorest travelers are brought inside; that everyone will be fed. But the Inn is also a business; and then as now sometimes welcome is secondary to wealth...

Allow yourself to be invited, to find yourself belonging here, in this Inn....

Watch what happens...note who comes...see who is welcomed and who is turned away...experience the magic...enjoy! And let the feast begin!!

Scene I: Outside the Inn

Guests, as you arrive, you encounter the tax collector and the Roman guard. Innkeepers and tax collectors were often dishonest, often cheating their own people by pocketing some of the collection. (If you are using your taxes to pay for the meal and/or contribute to a worthy cause, include that information here.... "However this tax collector is honest and all of your taxes will go to _____.")

Cast

Tax collector: _____

Roman Guard: _____

Beggar _____

Narrator _____

Guests will be seated, hands will be washed, and conversation enjoyed. All will begin singing "Shalom Chaverim" (Please note: The singing of this song throughout the play will indicate upcoming action or dialogue, encouraging each person's attention.)

Shalom Chaverim

Shalom Chaverim, Shalom Chaverim, Shalom, shalom !

Luh heet rah oht, luh heet rah oht, Shalom, shalom.!

Translation: Peace/Welcome, good friends until we meet again!

Scene II: At table in the Inn

Innkeeper _____

Innkeeper's wife _____

Joseph _____

Mary _____

Magi _____

Servants _____

Welcome: Innkeeper
Discussion of Events: Servants
Serving of the First course and Music
Intrusion of Beggar

Song: "Shalom, Chaverim"

Travelers from Galilee
Serving the Main Course & Music

Song: "Shalom Chaverim"

Royal visitors
Serving of the Dessert Course and Music
A Miracle Occurs...Come and See! (all are invited to exit to the "stable.")

Scene III: At the Stable
(list all characters)

Relationships Change....Innkeeper and Beggar
Finding yourself at the Manger comments by the Narrator (in our case, the pastor)
"Silent Night, Holy Night"

MENU AND RECIPES

SAMPLE MENUS

(We tried to do everything as finger foods.)

Appetizers

Flatbreads	Apple slices
Pita bread	Olives
Hummus	Cheeses
Baba Ghanoush	Honey

Entrée

Vegetables:

celery, carrots, grilled tomato (quartered)

Meat:

Fish, chicken, beef or lamb on wooden skewers (if you don't have skewers or access to grills, you can sauté bite-sized pieces of meat and serve them "as if" they had been grilled on skewers)

A thick porridge which could be sopped on bread instead of using utensils. We chose to do a thick beef stew with potatoes and carrots. (Some people still requested utensils.)

Spices:

cinnamon, salt mint, mustard

Desserts

Date-nut candy	Raisins, figs, dried fruits
Sweet breads	Cookies
Grapes	Bisquits

Beverages:

Grape and/or pomegranate juice

Hot tea with cardamom and cinnamon, or with anise, or sweetened mint tea

Water

A source for additional Middle Eastern recipes can be found at www.epicurean.com and other sites online as well as the following recipes.

HOUSE BREAD (EL KHOBZ)

This is a Middle Eastern flatbread that is easy to make. El Khobz basically means the “house bread” sort of like the “house wine.”

Ingredients

1 cup semolina flour
2 cups unbleached white flour
2 tsp. salt
1 tsp. sesame seeds
1 package active dry yeast
1 tsp. granulated sugar
¼ cup warm water
2¾ cups water
2 Tbsp vegetable oil
2 Tbsp. semolina flour for the countertop

Directions

Preheat oven to 400°F. Grease a large round metal pan (approx 12" across & 1.5" deep) or a cookie sheet. Mix yeast, sugar, and water in a cup or glass dish and set in a warm place until the yeast is bubbly.

Mix the flours, salt, and sesame seeds in a large bowl. Add the water, yeast mixture and oil slowly in batches, stirring as you add liquids. When it begins to pull together, remove from the bowl and knead the dough for 8-10 minutes. The dough should be smooth and elastic. Cover with a moist, hot towel and let rest for 5 minutes.

Spread some semolina flour on the countertop. If you are using the cookie sheet method, cut the dough in half and make each half into a smooth ball. Place the two balls on the cookie sheet or put the single ball into the round pan. Cover with moist, hot towels and let stand another 5 minutes. Then flatten the dough balls into a round disk about 5" in diameter. If you are using the round pan, flatten the dough until it covers the bottom of the pan. Cover with a moist, hot towel and let rise in a warm place until doubled in size (about an hour).

Use a sharp knife to make an X on the top and bake 15 minutes. Then lower the heat to 325°F and bake another 25–35 minutes or until it is browned and sounds hollow when you tap the bottom. Remove from the oven and cool. Cut just before serving.

Yield: 1 large round loaf or two smaller round loaves

SCENERY NOTES

SCENE I

Outside the Entrance to the Inn

This may be a hallway or small area leading to the dining hall. A canopy or small tarp is located near the entrance. Across the canopy is a banner which reads, “Welcome to Bethlehem...Town of the Census”. Hanging from the tarp is a Roman Crest (see next page).

Underneath the canopy is a small table bearing the sign, “Census Tax” and a scroll for the “House of David.” Seated behind the table is a tax collector. Standing nearby is a Roman soldier.

Guests bring their invitations which may be issued upon arrival, or mailed in advance to the tax collector who “registers them for the census” and collects the admission fee for the dinner. The tax collector then stamps their invitation. (Wax stamp sets may be used.) The invitation may then be a souvenir of the evening. Price of the tickets (taxes) pay for the meal, entertainment, and any selected service project or outreach mission.



CHARACTER SKETCHES

Narrator: Strong voice also in costume who adds explanations as needed throughout the event. This role is optional – suggestions have been provided to give you an idea of what the narrator might say but this person can ad lib as needed.



Innkeeper: A loud, jovial character like Teviah from Fiddler on the Roof; Very outspoken and friendly, but perhaps a little insincere and a distinct air of importance. He is a business man who wants to make a profit, yet shows some concern for the need of Mary and Joseph. He is obviously held in check by his wife.

Innkeeper's Wife: Intuitive and shrewd, has high regard for her husband and proud of his standing in the community but is clearly in charge of the inn. Strong, compassionate woman.

Innkeeper's Children & Servants: You can use as many children in this event as you like, and you can include just about any age. Even very young children had jobs to do – in this case helping with the serving, sweeping floors, clearing plates, carrying things for the musicians, etc.

Servants: village residents indentured apprentices both male and female. Duties are to wait tables and attend to guests.



Shepherds: Various ages. They are only seen during Scene III. Could possibly double as servants during the meal and then make an early exit to the Manger scene before the crowd arrives.

Musicians: Instrumentalists, vocalists, ensembles, strings, flutes, recorders, tambourines, and hand drums.





If you have willing cast members, they can learn to dance a simplified Hora and even invite guests into the dance. It is also best if someone can help by “calling” the steps in the beginning. Ask a Jewish friend to teach you the dance or see the following videos on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyRg1UIUkjl>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISakToFMQsw>
(a simpler version)



The Magi, Mary and Joseph will not be in the Inn for the meal. They will need to eat in some other location. Servants will need to eat earlier because they will be very busy attending to the guests.

A kitchen crew is needed in addition to the cast. They prepare the food on the trays and the servants bring it to the dining hall.

SCRIPT

Feast of the Innkeeper

Musical Prelude

SCENE I

Outside the Entrance to the Inn in the town of Bethlehem.

The tax collector is sitting at a small table under the tent which bears a
Sign...Welcome to Bethlehem -Town of the Census

A Roman soldier is solemnly standing by as guests arrive.

Tax Collector: Right this way! Present your identification! I'll take your money. Register here!

(Takes the admission money and has each person sign the scroll which reads "the undersigned are of the House of David.")

Tax Collector: Caesar and I thank you! Thank you, thank you, yes we do!

(These lines are to be delivered with an obvious air of dishonesty. He may try to slip some money out of the basket into his own money pouch, but the Roman guard intervenes.)

Roman Guard:

(Stands just outside the tent watching the proceedings. Improvises instructions to the crowd as the line forms to pay taxes and sign the scroll. Since Roman soldiers had the right to levy taxes for all kinds of infractions, perhaps some fines could be imposed for being too noisy or not forming a straight line, etc.)

SCENE II

Just inside the entrance the to the Inn

Innkeeper:

(Standing just inside the door to the Inn, invites the guests as they enter in to dinner after they register with a loud, cheery “car salesman” voice)

Come this way for a great meal and good night’s rest. My servants will seat you. I’m sure you are tired from your journey. Etc.

A Beggar:

(Sits slumped on the ground outside the Inn near the entrance. He does not engage the crowd, but his location should be obvious enough that he will be noticed by the guests.)

Have a servant (could be the **Narrator**) stand by the door to “remind” guests of what they are to do if they forget to touch the mezuzah and explain the process. You might also have a sign posted nearby telling them what to do and giving them the words to the Shema for those who might want to get into the “mood” by reciting the prayer to themselves.

Pairs of servants assist with the hand washing ritual by pouring water from a pitcher over the hands of the guests which are stretched over a bowl. The second servant offers a towel for the guest to dry his/her hands. If you have lots of guest arriving, set up several wash stations on either side of the entrance doorway.