

## **Reader's Theater**

### **St. John of Otzoon – A Man With a Message**

Cast:

*7 narrators,  
3 people in the crowd: Aris, Kohar and Vahan;  
the Deputy-Governor (DG),  
the Emir,  
Catholicos Hovhannes (CH)*

*Adapt this as you wish. Ideas in parentheses are optional but are easy to do and would greatly add to the visual impact of the presentation.*

*Reader's Theater does not require acting or memorization. It simply requires expressive, fluent reading! Narrators can stand in a line; three people in the crowd can be at one side, DG, the emir, and CH to the other. Props can be displayed as indicated.*

---

**N1:** Friends we, members of the \_\_\_\_\_-grade class, would like to introduce you today to the amazing life of a great saint of the Armenian Church -- St. John of Otzoon, or -- for those in the know -- Saint Hovhannes Otznezi. Just a few facts before we begin.

**N2:** St. Hovhannes is remembered as one of the most outstanding fathers of the Armenian Church. When we say "fathers" we mean the priest leaders of the church. He was born in the village of Otzoon and was a very educated man, studying with one of the most famous religious thinkers of the time.

**N3:** St. John fought all sorts of heroic battles on behalf of the Armenian Church. First, since he lived when the Arabs had conquered Armenian territory, he was able to stop the forced conversions of Christians to Islam and secure peace between the Arab overlords and the Armenian church.

**N4:** He was Catholicos between 717 and 728 and called a Council of Bishops in the City of Dvin (Duh-veen) where he established 37 new canons (*hold up placard with the definition "philosopher = lover of wisdom, thinks about the meaning of things"*) and then organized all church canons into a book, the first of its kind.

**N5:** He also wrote books and essays against all the different religious groups that were attacking the church. And then he was just a great guy -- humble, brave, very faithful, very loving to his people. He retired to a mountainside monastery where he lived his last days in peaceful prayer.

**N6:** Today we're going to tell you one of the most famous stories about him, so sit back, and listen.

**N7:** Or you can take notes if you want to. We'll try to do our best to make the story come alive.

**N1:** The year was 718.

**N2:** The place: Dvin, Armenia.

**N3:** Crowds of people had gathered from all over Armenia to see the new Catholicos in the beautiful procession from church through the town.

**N4:** The new Catholicos was Hovhannes III of Otzoon, known as "the philosopher" because he was so wise. He had gone to the best schools and was a master of mathematics, music, astronomy, grammar, and the art of speaking well and debate.

**N5:** He was a great theologian (*hold up a placard with the definition: "theologian = an expert in religion"*). He knew everything that people could know about God. Some people, who had witnessed the procession, came back to report.

**Vahan:** Now that we're under the occupation of the Arabs it's good we have such an eminent man as the head of the church.

**Aris:** Yes, he's like a great captain steering a ship on stormy seas.

**Kohar:** Did you see? First came the bearer of a tall cross (*lift a processional cross high*), wearing a robe with golden fringes. He was followed by members of the choir each holding a candle (*light a candle*) and singing as they walked

**Aris:** The deacons were swinging their censers (*swing two pourvars*) that shone brightly with every movement. The priests and bishops wore *shoorchars* (*hold up a placard with the definition "shoorchar=cape"*) made of rich materials of different shades and embroidered with gold and silver threads. A gentle wind would, every so often, blow out some of the candles held by the choir. (*Blow out candle.*)

**Vahan:** They would be embarrassed and try to light them again but they really didn't need to be embarrassed!

**Kohar:** No one was looking at them anyway. All the spectators were straining their necks to catch sight of the Catholicos. He was the last person in the procession, and two priests held the hem of his cape.

**Vahan:** The Catholicos was the most luxuriously vested of all; his vestments were made of the finest material found in the country, and decorated with an intricate design of wheat and grapes embroidered with golden threads and studded with precious gems. Occasionally the jeweled buckle of his belt flashed.

**Kohar:** Catholicos John held a metal staff (*someone holds out a bishop's staff*) with one hand and a cross in the other (*another holds out hand cross*), all glittering each time he turned to one side or the other to bless the people as he passed slowly by. A ring or amethyst surrounded with small diamonds covered most of the little finger of his right hand (*someone extends hand with ring*).

**Aris:** What a day and what a procession!

**N6:** One day, the Arab deputy-governor of Armenia, Abd-el-Aziz, described the Catholicos to his chief.

**DG:** The Patriarch of the Armenians is not only intelligent and learned; he will also delight your eyes, my lord. Never before has your Excellency seen such a man!

**N1:** The grand emir was a busy man. He was an absolute monarch, which means that he could do as he pleased with his millions of subjects. He was also very wealthy. But then he never wore fancy things. As a matter of fact, he dressed very simply and had a great dislike for rich clothes and those who wore them. He said:

**Emir:** I must see this patriarch of the Armenians and teach him a lesson. Tell Walid to come and see me at once,

**N2:** Walid was an Arab general. To him, the emir said:

**Emir:** From this moment on you are the governor of Armenia, Go there immediately and ask the Armenian patriarch to come here for a conference.

**N3:** Within a month, Catholicos Hovhannes was in Damascus (*hold up a placard with the definition "Damascus = capital of modern Syria"*) with several clergymen and attendants.

**N4:** On the day of the conference, the Catholicos looked his glorious best, as the grand emir had hoped. Hovhannes put on his most magnificent clothes, and oiled his hair and sprinkled his beard with gold dust as was the custom of the day.

**N5:** The grand emir and all his splendidly-clothed retinue were waiting in the palace. As the tall, splendid Catholicos walked in, there was a hush. All, including the emir, were spellbound. But the grand emir was a determined man and he rarely shrank from saying what was on his mind. No sooner had they greeted each other, than invited the Catholicos to sit by him.

**Emir:** I understand, Patriarch, that your prophet Jesus was a humble person and never wore elaborate garments. He like simplicity and he recommended the same to his disciples. Surely, Jesus would not approve of your wearing these expensive clothes if he saw you. And yet you claim to be one of his followers, and to be able to teach his doctrines...

**CH:** Your Excellency is right. It is true that our Lord practiced and preached virtues of simplicity and humility. But he and his disciples had a power that we do not have. They had the power of working miracles. They did not have to wear special clothes because they could easily be distinguished by their spiritual power. They did not need signs that could be seen. We do. Even Your Excellency has to wear special insignia sometimes to show his authority. But in case Your Excellency wishes to know more, I will explain further, if the gentlemen who are with us will kindly withdraw.

**N6:** The grand emir and the Catholicos were left alone. Then St. John took off his outer garments. The grand emir was amazed to see that the Catholicos was wearing a shirt made of camel's hair and it pricked the wearer like hundreds of sharp needles. The skin of the Catholicos was raw to the point of bleeding. The grand emir could not believe his eyes. He came and touched the coarse material.

**Emir:** But how can you wear this? Only God can give a man patience enough to endure it.

**CH:** This is for me. To remind myself of the sufferings of Jesus Christ on the cross, to remind myself of my sins and my imperfections. The brilliant vestments that I wear on the outside are for other people's eyes, to show them the authority of a prince of the church.

**N7:** The grand emir could not find anything to say. Suddenly he felt the warmest friendship for the Catholicos who, as he now knew, was a humble servant of the Lord. He wanted to do something for him.

**Emir:** Ask what you will, and if it is within my power, I will grant it.

**CH:** I will not ask Your Excellency for any favors for myself. But I would ask you to order that Christians be left free in Armenia to practice the faith of their choice and that the churches not be required to pay taxes. If you grant us these favors, my people and I will be loyal subjects of your government.

**N1:** The emir granted the Catholicos all his requests and the Armenians and the Arabs became friends for a time and lived in peace. Shortly after his return from Damascus he called a meeting which was held in Dvin. At least 30 Armenian bishops came to this church council along with the Armenian assistant to the Arab governor, Ashod the Bagratid, and several other officials.

**N2:** This council passed several church laws or canons. Catholicos Hovhannes is the first head of the Armenian Church to have compiled a complete book of canons. He is even more famous for his many writings on the Armenian Christian faith.

**N3:** Catholicos Hovhannes, St. John of Otzoon, died in 728. He is one of the most revered saints in the Armenian Church.