



## Session Two

# The Shy Shepherd

**T**oday's lesson is centered on the visit of a group of shepherds to the cave that was the birthplace of Jesus. The parallel of this story with last week's story about the visit of the Magi to the birth cave needs to begin with a comparison of the two stories. In much the same way that Matthew and Luke approached the story of Jesus' birth from two different perspectives, these stories of two boys from very different backgrounds also tell the birth story from two different perspectives.

**?** *What do you remember as the main differences between the Magi's apprentice in last week's story and the shepherd boy in this week's story?*

Balthasar's apprentice, Samir, was a Gentile Persian in training to be a Magi. Even though he may not have come from a wealthy family, he was familiar with wealth and royalty. Even though his work at the time of the story was largely as a servant, he probably ate very well, got to travel with the Magi, and lived in a stim-

ulating cultural environment. He would have had expectations that, someday, he would be a Magi himself and would be a respected intellectual leader, a pagan priest, and a wealthy member of Persian society. On the long journey to Bethlehem, Samir might have been taught something about Judaism by the knowledgeable Magi.

In contrast, Judah, the shepherd boy, was from a rural Jewish agricultural family that probably scratched out a bare existence. He would have understood that all religions except Judaism were idolatrous and evil but he would also have chafed somewhat under the restrictive Jewish religious laws that governed so many aspects of his daily life. Even though the great Temple was only five miles away and could be seen lighting up the night sky from the valley where he kept sheep, he probably had not been to it more than a time or two, if that.

A significant difference between the two boys would have been their awareness of the

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concept of Messiah. If Samir knew anything at all about Judaism, it would probably not have included any awareness of the hope of a coming Messiah. But, Judah would have been keenly aware of the hope. He would have been keenly aware that his people were living under the occupying forces of the Roman army, that King Herod was as much pagan as he was Jew and was in a close alliance with the Romans, and that everyone hoped for the day when the Messiah would come to set them free. As a resident of the outskirts of Bethlehem, he would also have been very aware that David, the greatest of the Hebrew kings, came from his village of Bethlehem and that the expected Messiah would come from the same lineage.

**?** *One boy came expecting to see a baby who would grow up to be a king while the other boy came expecting to see a baby who would grow up to be the Messiah, a savior. How would these expectations have colored their meeting with the Holy Family?*

### The Story of the Shy Shepherd Boy

**?** *What did you like best about this week's story?*

**?** *In what way did it change your understanding of First Century life? In what ways did it change your understanding of the birth of Jesus?*

The story in the student's book for this lesson is about a shy shepherd boy, a loner, who was tending sheep at night when the angels came to announce the birth of Jesus in a stable in nearby Bethlehem. It is important that you guide the class through a comparison of the fictional story and the material in Scripture as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of

the Scripture. Try to help the class identify:

1. Those things in the story which are purely fictitious but descriptive of First Century life (the shepherd boy's guarding of the sheepfold, his pet goat, his relationship with the other shepherds, the specific location in the valley between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, etc.).
2. Those things which are based on ancient church tradition but not on Scripture (the giving of gifts to the Holy Family, the stable in a cave, the presence of the shepherds and the Magi in the cave at the same time, etc.).
3. Those things which are Biblical but might be in question because of conflict with other things in Scripture (the arrival at the stable rather than a "house").
4. Those things which are absolutely verified by Scripture (the shepherds being visited by a host of angels, the Holy Family in a stable in Bethlehem, Jesus in a manger, etc.).

### The Characters

*The Shepherds.* The shepherds in Luke's birth story present many fewer difficulties about who they were and why they were included than the Magi in Matthew's story. Shepherds were everywhere in First Century Palestine as well as most of the rest of the Mediterranean world. They were, generally, viewed as unclean peasants in Jewish religious circles and, by law, they were one of the trades prohibited from becoming judges because they were believed to be too dishonest. In Luke's narrative, the shepherds are clearly there to emphasize one of Luke's primary themes: that Jesus came to liberate the poor, the marginalized, and the outcasts of society.

However, in the Gentile culture to which

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Luke's gospel was primarily addressed, shepherds were understood in a much more favorable way. They were considered to be rustic pastoral people who were gentle and caring in the handling of their animals. They appear frequently in Greek religious legends as people to whom Greek gods and goddesses appeared. The image of the shepherd boy playing a flute while tending his sheep is common in Greek and Roman domestic art.

The shepherds of Luke's narrative were also linked to Bethlehem, the hometown of David, another shepherd boy, who became the greatest of the Hebrew kings. Jewish historical writings tell us that the shepherds in the valley between Jerusalem and Bethlehem raised sheep primarily for the purpose of sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple. They may have been employed or under contract in some way to the high priests and may have been, in some way, "sacred shepherds." The valley is today called "Shepherds Field" because of its traditional association with the shepherds of Luke's birth narrative.

Shepherd/sheep imagery was common in the Old Testament Scripture as a symbol of the relationship between God and the people of Israel. Sheep were relatively defenseless and in constant need of care and supervision and God was understood to be providing providential care and rules for living. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." (*Psalms* 23.1) "They shall all have one shepherd." (*Ezekiel* 37.24b) "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock ... and I will bring them back to their fold." (*Jeremiah* 23.3) "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." (*Isaiah* 40.11)

In the New Testament, the shepherd/sheep imagery became even more pronounced. Jesus was seen throughout the books of the New

Testament as the Good Shepherd of all sheep. "Our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep" (*Hebrews* 13.20) "They were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things." (*Mark* 6.34) "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep...Whoever enters by me, he will be saved." (*John* 10.7-9) "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (*John* 10.11)

**?** *If Luke included the announcement of the angels to the shepherds to emphasize that Jesus had come to free the poor, marginalized, and oppressed in society, who would the angels visit in today's culture?*

**?** *Even though shepherds were commonplace in the First Century, we see very few in modern America. What images best symbolize the loving, caring nature of God and Christ today?*

**Joseph.** With the exception of two references to Jesus as the "son of Joseph" (*John* 1.45, 6.42) and one as "the carpenter's son" (*Matthew* 13.55), Joseph is not mentioned anywhere in the New Testament outside of the birth stories in Matthew and Luke. Most scholars presume that this is because Joseph was considerably older than Mary and died at some time before Jesus began his ministry. Others argue that there is not further mention of Joseph because he was only the "foster" father of Jesus. Joseph was presumably one of the "parents" when Jesus was twelve years old (*Luke* 2.41) and, the fact that Jesus had four brothers and some sisters (*Matthew* 13.55 and *Mark* 6.3) would mean that Joseph was probably alive at least until Jesus was a young teen-ager.

Matthew's gospel seems to say that Joseph and Mary were residents of Bethlehem at the

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time of Jesus' birth. But, after their flight into Egypt to escape from Herod the Great, they didn't return to their home in Bethlehem because conditions were unfavorable in Judea under Herod Archelaus. Instead, they settled in Nazareth in Galilee which was ruled by another of Herod the Great's sons, Herod Antipas. (*Matthew 2.19-23*)

Furthermore, in Matthew's gospel, Joseph was the one who received all the divine communications while Mary was barely mentioned. The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew was traced through Joseph (*Matthew 1.1-16*) and angels came to Joseph in dreams to tell him Mary had conceived through an act of the Holy Spirit (*Matthew 1.20-21*), to tell him to flee to Egypt (*Matthew 2.13-14*), and to tell him to move to Galilee (*Matthew 2.19-20*).

On the other hand, in Luke's gospel, Joseph and Mary were clearly residents of Nazareth before the birth of Jesus. They traveled to Bethlehem because it was Joseph's home city and they had to go there to register for the census, probably for tax purposes. In Luke, even though Joseph is present, Mary dominates the narrative. She received word from the archangel Gabriel that she would become pregnant and give birth to "the Son of the Most High." (*Luke 1.26-38*) She went to visit Elizabeth, received her blessing, and recited The Magnificat. (*Luke 1.39-80*) And, in the rest of Luke's narrative, Mary and Joseph were always mentioned together, nowhere is Joseph mentioned by himself.

**?** *Why do you believe Joseph disappears from the gospels after Jesus is twelve years old?*

**Mary.** The mother of Jesus was probably twelve to fourteen years old at the time of Jesus' birth. She would have become engaged to Joseph through an arrangement between her

father and Joseph. Even though she was engaged to Joseph, she would have continued to live with her parents for a full year until the marriage. However, during that time of betrothal, she was, for all practical purposes, legally married to Joseph. Therefore, her pregnancy would have been a terrible scandal and could have caused her to be convicted of adultery for which she could have been executed.

The question of Mary's virginal conception, "Was Jesus conceived without a human father?" and the companion question, "Did Mary remain virginal the rest of her life?" are the oldest and most controversial issues regarding Mary. Even though we commonly refer to the "virgin birth" of Jesus, it is the issue of his conception and not of his birth that is controversial. Even though both Matthew and Luke clearly believed in the historicity of the virginal conception, it is unique in the New Testament to these two writers and with them, it is only mentioned in the infancy narratives. When Mary is mentioned later in all four gospels, there is no reference to either the virginal conception of Jesus or any reference to any perpetual virginity of Mary similar to the idea that developed in later church tradition.

The most important reference to virginity in the two infancy narratives is in Matthew 2.18-25. The entire passage deals with the subject and it is stated with absolute clarity that Mary had no marital relations with Joseph until she had borne Jesus. However, this specific explanation is built around a "fulfillment passage" in which Matthew quoted Isaiah 7.14, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.'" (*Matthew 1.23*) In Isaiah, the actual quotation reads, "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel." (*Isaiah*

7.14) In short, even though Matthew interpreted (as most of the people of his time did) the Isaiah passage to mean “virgin,” in fact it only meant “young woman.” Outside of this “fulfillment passage” Matthew nowhere else mentions the virginal conception.

The issue of whether or not Luke understood the conception of Jesus to have been without a human father is even more controversial. The only reference to Mary’s virginity in Luke is the “announcement passage” (*Luke 1.26-35*) in which the angel Gabriel came to tell Mary, “you will conceive in your womb and will bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Later in the passage, when Mary asked, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” the angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.” Even though virginal conception is very strongly implied in this passage in Luke, there is nothing in it that specifically precludes the possibility that Mary conceived Jesus through natural intercourse with Joseph. This intercourse could have come after the visit of Gabriel and could have been understood as an act of the Holy Spirit simply because of the nature of the child that would be borne to her. Outside of this “announcement passage,” Luke nowhere else mentioned the virginal conception.

**?** *Do you believe Jesus was conceived without a human father? Why or why not?*

**?** *Do you believe that Mary went on to have children (brothers and sisters of Jesus) or that she remained virginal throughout the rest of her life?*

**?** *Why is the virginal conception of Jesus an important ingredient (or not an important ingredient) of your faith?*

## **The Scriptures**

**Luke 2.1-5. The Dating and Census.** Luke and Matthew both give details about the birth of Jesus which can be compared to secular records to set the date of his birth. Unfortunately, the details are in conflict with one another. Matthew tells us that it was “In the time of King Herod after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea” (*Matthew 2.1*) and we know that he meant Herod the Great because later he wrote that, after Herod died, “Archelaus was ruling over Judea.” (*Matthew 2.22*) After the death of Herod the Great, his kingdom was divided up between three of his sons, Archelaus (Ethnarch of Judea and Samaria), Antipas (Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea) and Phillip (Tetrarch of several non-Jewish areas north of Galilee). Luke also says that the annunciation to Elizabeth and Zechariah, which happened six months before the annunciation to Mary, happened “In the days of King Herod of Judea. (*Luke 1.5*) Herod died in March of 4 B.C. Therefore, if you use Herod as the dating mechanism, Jesus was born about 6 B.C.

Luke also tells us that the census decree that took Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem at the end of Mary’s pregnancy came from Emperor Augustus and happened while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Augustus ruled from 43 B.C. to 14 A.D. and Quirinius became Legate of Syria in 6 A.D. Furthermore, we know that Quirinius held a census in Judea, which was under Syrian jurisdiction, in 6 A.D. shortly after he took office. Therefore, if you use Quirinius and his census as the dating mechanism, Jesus was born about 6 A.D., twelve years later than the dating based on Herod.

A majority of scholars believe that Luke was correct about Herod but in error about Quirinius and may have confused the name

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with Quintilius Varus who ruled from 6 to 4 B.C. They opt for dating the birth of Jesus before the death of Herod because so much importance is placed on Herod in Matthew's gospel and the parallel reference to Herod in Luke. However, others believe that Luke, who clearly had more interest in historical detail, was correct and that the known census under the time of Quirinius was the time of Jesus' birth. However, this invalidates virtually all of the material in Matthew.

**?** *When do you believe Jesus was born? Does it make any difference to you which date is accurate?*

**Luke 2.6-7. The Birth in the Stable.** In Luke's gospel we find the beloved image of Mary and Joseph in a stable because Bethlehem was filled to overflowing with people in town for the census. A First Century inn would have had a stable for traveler's animals much like modern hotels and motels provide parking lots or garages for traveler's vehicles and an enterprising innkeeper was probably renting "overflow" space. Since at least 150, a cave under the hillside of the town of Bethlehem has been identified as the stable in which Jesus was born. In 350, Constantine built a basilica above the cave and, today, pilgrims still climb down angular stairs to visit the cave under the great altar of the church. Actually, the hillside has a network of caves which have been used as stables, storage areas, and hiding places at Bethlehem for centuries. Remember, however, that Matthew's birth narrative said the Magi visited the Holy Family in a "house."

The image of Jesus being wrapped in bands of cloth (swaddling clothes) and lying in a manger was important enough to Luke that he repeated it three times (*Luke 2.7, 12, 16*). Even the dramatic announcement of the angel

of the Lord to the shepherds, which was filled with theological statement, said, "this will be a sign to you, you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." The angel didn't tell them where to find the baby just how the baby would be when they did find him. (*Luke 2.12*) A swaddling cloth was the common way of clothing a baby. It was a square of cloth with another long strip of cloth attached to it. The baby was rolled in the square of cloth and then the long strip was wound around to hold it together. The manger was a feed trough for the animals.

Scholars are baffled as to why the image of the swaddling clothes and manger was so important to Luke. Some think he saw it as a symbol of the fact that Jesus was rejected at his birth (no place for them in the inn) just as he would be at his death. Others think it was symbolic of the fact that Jesus came primarily for the poor and oppressed, a primary theme in Luke's gospel. Still others think the swaddling cloths were a foreshadowing of the way in which Jesus would be wrapped in linen clothes and laid in a borrowed tomb at his burial. Still others believe that this was merely a detail in the story about the birth that was handed down to Luke and it impressed him enough that he emphasized it more than other things.

**?** *What does it say to you that Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger?*

**Luke 2.8-20. The Visit of the Angels.** The appearance first of the angel who announced the birth of Jesus and then of the heavenly host who sang praises is one of the most endearing images in Scripture and the focal point of most of our Christmas carols. Still, exactly what happened is not very clear. Luke had all of the important events of his birth stories announced by angels. The archangel Gabriel appeared to

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Zechariah and told him Elizabeth would become pregnant with John. (*Luke 1.11-20*) Then, Gabriel appeared to Mary and announced that she would become pregnant with Jesus. (*Luke 1.26-38*) Then an “angel of the Lord” appeared to the shepherds and announced, “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” (*Luke 2.11*)

More peculiar, however, was the poem sung by a “multitude of the heavenly host.” The poem was an explanation of what had been said by the angel and might well have been a literary addition by Luke (or some later writer) to his source. It said that the birth of Jesus offered “peace” to all whom God favored. In First Century Judaism, “peace” meant much more than the elimination of hostility. It meant total harmony of life, perfection, the peace that only God had. With the coming of Jesus, God had made this kind of peace, this salvation, available to all of humankind.

The “heavenly host” would have been understood in the First Century to be the spirits that dwelt in God’s presence both in heaven and in the Temple. In other places in Scripture, the heavenly host is often accompanied by indefinable lights, colors and sounds.

**?** *Do you believe that angels came to Zechariah, Mary and the shepherds or*

*do you believe it was some other phenomena which was described by the writers as angels?*

**?** *The story for this week described the visit of the angel and the heavenly host in terms of bright lights, colors, sounds, and voices. How does this compare with the image you have in your mind of what that night was like?*

### Preparation for the Next Session

The next session in the student’s book focuses on the story of the baptism of Jesus by his cousin, John the Baptist. It is an event normally understood to be the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as an adult but it follows naturally on the birth stories in which both Jesus and John are introduced. A primary difference is that the story of the baptism appears in all four gospels. The Scriptures to be read along with the story in the study book are Matthew 3.1-17, Mark 1.1-11, Luke 3.1-22, and John 1.15-34. It will be helpful if students not only compare these Scriptures with the material in the student’s book but with one another because it is one of the rare instances in the Bible where the same event is reported by four different authors from four different perspectives.