

Historical Introduction to the Life of Christ:

Bibliographic note: apart from the Bible, these notes were formed from Donald Guthrie's New Testament Introduction, F.F. Bruce's New Testament History, and Eduard Lohse's The New Testament Environment.

- 1A Herod in many ways personifies the trouble in Israel at the time of Christ.
 - 1B For a long time, hundreds of years, the Jews had lived under the control of one nation or another, and they longed to be truly autonomous.
 - 2B It seemed like whatever empire had the upper hand in history would rule them.
 - 3B If it wasn't the Babylonians, then it was the Persians, when the Persians took over.
 - 4B If it wasn't the Persians, it was the Greeks, when Alexander came rumbling through the ancient near east.
 - 5B If it wasn't Alexander, it was the Romans, after the death of Alexander and the disintegration of his empire.
 - 6B They still understood that they were a holy people, set apart for God.
 - 1C They always remembered that, if nothing else.
 - 2C They rankled under the rule of Rome, and it especially rubbed them wrong that Herod, the so-called Herod the Great had power over them.
 - 7B He was worse than a Gentile; he was a half-Jewish Idumaeon, a descendant of Esau, a wild desert-dwelling type. The Jews considered them with no small amount of prejudice.
 - 8B To make matters worse, Herod was hardly a model human being. He has been called a monster - one who was crafty and cruel, jealous and vain and always quick to seek revenge when wronged.
 - 1C He came to the throne over the Roman province of Judea through cunning and manipulation of Marc Antony.
 - 2C He had nine or ten wives. Even the historians lost count after a while.
 - 3C On the smallest of suspicion he had even his favorite wife, Mariamne, put to death, along with her sons Alexander and Aristobulus.
 - 4C Even while on his own deathbed, just days before he died he had his own son, his flesh and blood Antipater put to death.
 - 5C Caesar Augustus was heard to say, "It is better to be Herod's hog than his own son!"
 - 6C Again at his deathbed he ordered all the principle men in Israel to be rounded up and placed in the local stadium, where they could be surrounded by his soldiers and then slain when he died. The reason: so that there would be great mourning at his death.
 - 7C To be ruled by someone who was so obviously inferior! Who was so immoral and cruel! It would be like Idi Amin or Haile Selassie ruling over South Africa thirty years ago.
 - 9B It must have been difficult to read the Scriptures, and to know that their destiny was so great, and yet have the reality so different.
 - 1C Understand, however, that this was Divine Judgement on the nation of Israel; that

- they had neglected their relationship with God, and that the situation was appropriate to their spiritual state.
- 2C In this case the outward circumstances reflected accurately the inward condition: slavery.
- 10B It is no wonder, then, there was a great fascination in the nation of Israel with the prophecies about the Messiah.
- 1C The one who would come and re-establish the greatness of their kingdom and their people.
- 2C A man who would rise up and smite their enemies and make them a free people once again.
- 3C From time to time a fairly great and famous man would rise up, and there would be some excitement about the possibility of his being the Messiah.
- 4C Of course, things would quiet down when he turned out to be quite human, and the slavery of Israel droned on and on.
- 5C After a time there was even a certain amount of cynicism about the whole deal.
- 6C The same phenomenon exists today with the fundy fascination about the end times and the return of Christ.
- 11B Herod tried bribing the Jews, so that they would like him, and he could view himself as a successful ruler.
- 1C Julius Caesar had given Herod a fantastic and truly royal inaugural celebration back in 37 B.C., when Herod took the throne.
- 2C He always longed for that past glory, when in fact the traditional Roman warning of "sic transit gloria mundi" applied to him more than any other.
- 3C The bribes came in the form of a building program that was the very rival of Solomon's.
- 4C He built monuments and buildings in the Holy Land, and even rebuilt their temple in magnificent fashion, topping it with a golden dome.
- 5C The rebuilding of the Temple was much like the building of the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California.
- 6C More was added every year. A higher roof here, an annex there - all very magnificent.
- 7C When Herod died, his relatives took over the folly and the never-ending program continued until it was finally finished in 66 A.D., some 87 years after it was begun.
- 8C It is one of the great ironies of history that it was burned down just four years later when Jerusalem was destroyed.
- 9C Other buildings and monuments were undertaken.
- 1D A temple, a forum, and a theatre at Samaria.
- 2D A great Greco-Roman capital, a temple, and port at Caesarea.
- 3D The port was an engineering marvel that even today is remarked upon by the archaeologists who work at the site.
- 4D Luxurious palaces and fortified retreats were built at Masada, Jerusalem, Jericho, and Herodium, which was near Bethlehem.

- 5D In Jerusalem he had baths, a theatre, and a Hippodrome constructed.
- 6D He also promoted Greek and Roman games so that the people might be entertained.
- 12B All of these things struck a sour note - as any bribe to a slave will.
 - 1C The people really did not want these things. They wanted to be autonomous and free.
 - 2C But in order to be truly free, any people must know God, and that was exactly the problem in Israel.
- 13B Herod was the king. The people were unhappy. Their response to his despotism is worthwhile to note.
- 2A First should be the Pharisees. After all, they always liked to be first in everything.
 - 1B The word Pharisee is the Greek translation from the Aramaic, and it means to be separated.
 - 2B To the Pharisee, this meant a separation from the influences of the Gentiles on their religion and culture.
 - 3B We have a very similar thing occurring in our nation today.
 - 1C The Pagan influences in our society are waging war against the marvelous culture and vital relationship with God that our forefathers enjoyed.
 - 2C It is a natural and good response to do what you can to protect what is good; to defend it from those who so zealously attempt to destroy it.
 - 3C Every time that the nation of Israel fell under the rule of another nation - whether Babylon or Persia or Greece or Rome, they felt like they were losing a little bit more of themselves.
 - 4B The foreign nationals would come in with their foreign Gods and foreign customs and foreign games, and away would go just a little bit more of what was truly Jewish.
 - 5B The emphasis of the Pharisees was in the area of the Mosaic Law.
 - 1C It was their aim to protect and uphold the Law of Moses, so that the pollution of foreigners and their foreign Gods would not destroy what made the nation of Israel so distinct, and so great in their time.
 - 2C This is why they came to hate Herod so very much.
 - 3C For some four hundred years before the birth of Christ they strove to fulfill their mission as they saw it.
 - 4C Such an aim was not so bad, but in carrying out that aim they became so extreme as to be parody of the Law.
 - 6B Their undue attention to detail, and especially their imagination in creating details which did not exist resulted in their missing the point of the Law entirely.
 - 7B The Law was designed to bring the people of Israel to a relationship with the living God through the provision of knowledge essential to the maintenance of that relationship.
 - 8B It was not designed to be carried out just for the sake of accomplishment and preservation.
 - 9B The very best way in which to accomplish their aim would have been to perpetuate the Law through having a relationship with God by it.

- 10B Their teachings about religious matters are quite a revelation of their character.
- 11B They tried ardently to avoid all physical contact with the Pagan Gentiles.
- 1C Even touching one would make them ceremonially unclean.
 - 2C This is why the Pharisees took such great offense at Christ's close association with the tax-collectors and sinners.
- 12B They always stuck to the letter of the Law, without a hint of flexibility.
- 1C They defined exactly many things that were not set forth in the Law.
 - 2C They were obsessed with the Sabbath, and were constantly specifying and clarifying what could and could not be done; how far one could travel; exactly how much could be lifted; what the precise exceptions were.
 - 3C Of course, the point that the Sabbath was designed for concentration on God was lost on them.
- 13B They were consumed with the idea of appearance.
- 1C They would pray long and loud in public.
 - 2C They would contrive special hats to cover their eyes, so that they might not see a woman (these were called the bloody Pharisees, because they were always running into things).
 - 3C Their motivation is equally revealing. They did what they did at the time of Christ for two reasons: to gain power, and to avoid judgement.
- 14B The latter is especially interesting in the light of 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."
- 15B They were fervent in their legalism lest they offend God, and thus come under His judgment in the eternal state.
- 1C But you cannot have a true relationship with one you fear.
 - 2C You must have confidence before God, and that was one thing the Pharisee did not have.
 - 3C The former motivation, that of lust for power, had been hanging around the Pharisees for quite some time.
- 16B Their mission, though warped in its execution, was quite a noble one.
- 17B They looked at their mission, and decided that they needed power, political power in order to carry it out.
- 18B Much like their association with the Law, their attempts to gain power led to their addiction to it, and its rule over them.
- 19B Perhaps the best characterization of their addiction to power was their success in the Maccabean Revolt, which occurred a couple of centuries before the birth of Christ.
- 1C In the intermediate period between the death of Alexander in 323 B.C. and the establishment of Roman control from 63 B.C. onward, Israel remained under the nominal control of Greece and even Syria.
 - 2C Syria had one incredibly evil ruler by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes.
 - 1D This man was so evil that he made Herod the Great into Dudley Doughty by comparison.

- 2D He was the prototype for the Antichrist of the Tribulation.
- 3D In 168 B.C. he desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem by setting up an altar to Jupiter Olympus, where he dedicated the use of the Temple to this false God by offering up the flesh of a swine.
- 3C This was the 'abomination of desolation' of Daniel 11:31, ""His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation."
- 4C Antiochus made a furious effort, with the help of the corrupt high priesthood (who helped because of a bribe) to Hellenize the Jews.
- 5C The high priest himself, a man by the name of Jason, was power mad, and attempted a coup in Jerusalem when Antiochus was mistakenly reported dead during a military campaign in Egypt.
- 6C His brief reign was characterized by violence, but the real violence would begin when Antiochus heard of the coup.
 - 1D He returned to Jerusalem with his army, besieged it, and killed 40,000 Jews upon its capture, and sold at least as many into slavery.
 - 2D Then he went back to Egypt.
 - 3D Eventually, Antiochus awoke the ire of Rome, and he was arrested and ordered to back off from Egypt or die.
 - 1E He did so, but he made another stop at Jerusalem, where he took out his frustration on the Jews.
 - 2E He entered the city on the Sabbath, and murdered thousands of men in the synagogues, while enslaving the women and children.
 - 3E He defiled the Temple in every way imaginable, and caused the daily ritual system to cease entirely. This meant war.
- 7C During this time of great persecution there was a priest by the name of Mattathias.
 - 1D He was an old man of noble blood, and he had retired to a little town west of Jerusalem.
 - 2D There he was commanded to sacrifice on the Pagan altar, and he refused.
 - 3D In fact, he lost it when a Judean came forward to sacrifice, and he struck the man, overthrew the altar, called upon the faithful to follow him, and fled with his sons into the wilderness.
 - 4D This was the Maccabaeen family. The example of Mattathias was followed by many in various parts of the country.
 - 5D His story was well-known, and the idolatrous altars were being overthrown, and Jewish worship and culture was being reestablished.
 - 6D The rigorous life of a rebel took its toll on Mattathias, and he died just a year later, in 166 A.D.
- 8C The third son of Mattathias, Judas, took over for him in directing the war for independence.
 - 1D He was a man full of energy and clever in the running of the war.
 - 2D He was an expert at guerrilla warfare, attacking at night, and at the most

surprising times and places.

- 3D Encouraged by early success, he became even more bold, and defeated Antiochus' head general, Apollonius, at Beth-horon.
- 4D It was only a little while later that Antiochus left Jerusalem and left the government to a man name Lysias.
- 5D Lysias was a military dunce, and Judas defeated his larger army at Emmaus, and later at Bethsura.
- 6D Judas was then able to occupy Jerusalem, where he purified the Temple.
- 7D Judas continued his triumphs on the military field, and after the battle of Adasa, the Jews had almost won their independence. Almost.
- 9C Bacchides led another invading army, and this time the Jews were caught unaware.
 - 1D Able to only muster a small group of men, and losing many of those on the night before the battle, Judas was defeated, and died.
 - 2D All that was gained seemed lost. The patriots were in a state of total disorder, and it was only renewed persecution that brought them together again.
- 10C The Jews again looked to the Maccabees, this time Jonathan, the youngest son of Mattathias would be their champion.
 - 1D Jonathan would fight a skillful defensive campaign in the Jordan Valley, and when a new king took the throne in Syria, he gained support, and Israel a fair amount of freedom.
 - 2D Jonathan was made high priest, and there was peace in the land for some 20 years.
 - 3D Sadly, in 144 B.C. Jonathan fell victim to the treachery of a man by the name of Tryphon, and was imprisoned in Ptolemais, in Galilee. This act left just one Maccabee, Simon.
- 11C Simon had all along been a steady military leader, but had left the national leadership to his brothers.
 - 1D Now it was his turn, and he placed himself at the head of the patriot party.
 - 2D After a short while, Tryphon put Jonathan to death, and seized the throne of Syria.
 - 3D Simon had the wits to make an appeal for the freedom of the Jews to Demetrius, a well-known general with connections to Rome.
 - 4D This appeal was accepted, and once again it seemed as though the Jews would be free.
- 12C Although Mattathias had begun the rebellion over the issue of the Jewish religion, after 32 years, the war, and political freedom became the thing.
 - 1D Relationship with God had taken a back seat to military strategy and tactics, and politics.
 - 2D And remember, that no nation can remain free without a relationship with God.
 - 3D At the time of Simon, in 143 B.C., Israel had apparently won their freedom through military skill and political maneuvering.
 - 4D They had won almost every battle that they had fought for 25 years.

- 5D They had successfully manipulated the political machines of their foreign occupants.
- 6D They had done everything just right, but they had failed in the most important regard: the spiritual life.
- 13C Just eight years after the apparent victory of Israel, Simon and two of his sons was murdered by Ptolemaeus, and in 135 B.C. the nation of Israel once again found itself on the brink of slavery.
- 14C John Hyrcanus was one of the two living sons of Simon.
 - 1D When he heard of the death of his father, he marched with the army against Jericho.
 - 2D Unfortunately, Ptolemaeus held a trump card: he had Simon's widow, John's mother, captive, and the sabbatical year of the year of Jubilee was just around the corner, so the siege of Jericho failed.
 - 3D Seeing no further use for the woman, Ptolemaeus had her killed, and then he fled to Philadelphia.
 - 4D Antiochus the sixth (not Epiphanes) then invaded Judea, and besieged Jerusalem, and Hyrcanus and the army was trapped there and placed into a desperate situation.
- 15C The Jews caught a break when a truce was granted for the passover feast, and Hyrcanus took the opportunity to bargain with Ptolemaeus.
 - 1D Hyrcanus compromised like crazy in order to gain the freedom of Israel, even going to the extreme of opening David's tomb to pay the tribute demanded by the Syrian General.
 - 2D He then went to Parthia to bargain further for the freedom of Israel, and through compromise and manipulation was able to establish a treaty that lasted for more than fifty years.
- 16C By 30 B.C., the line of the Maccabees had died out with the death of Hyrcanus II, the grandson of Hyrcanus. His granddaughter was Mariamne, who went on to marry Herod the Great.
- 17C Now, where were the Pharisees during all this time? Well, they were doing their extremely legalistic thing for the most part, but they also began to grasp for political power, so that they might more effectively carry out their mission.
 - 1D At first they were on the side of the Maccabees, but the more the rebels concentrated on the war, the further they got away from strict observance of the Law, and so they earned the wrath of the Pharisees.
 - 2D Because of the gross compromises of Hyrcanus, and looting of David's tomb, more and more Jews went to the side of the Pharisees.
 - 3D After the death of Hyrcanus I, his daughter became queen, and seeing the handwriting on the wall, she abandoned her political power to Pharisees.
- 18C At the time of the birth of Christ, the Romans through Herod held the outward political power, while the Pharisees held it internally. The people found themselves under a double tyranny, and it was a difficult time indeed.

19C Concluding principles.

1D Freedom without a relationship with God is in reality slavery.

2D War without a relationship with God is a waste.

3D Both slavery and freedom begin in the soul.

4D John 8:32, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.""

5D Gal 5:1, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."