

New Testament Survey I

Life of Christ I

EXPLORE THE BOOK BY J. SIDLOW BAXTER
AND OTHERS



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B.A.M.A. Bible Institutes Inc.

(Baptist Asian Missions Association Inc.)

133 Isarog Street, LaLoma, Quezon City 1114 R.P.

Introduction to the New Testament

THE "SILENT YEARS"

BETWEEN Malachi and Matthew are about four hundred "silent years" during which God remained silent so far as fresh revelation was concerned. The broad outline of these years is given in Daniel 11, but much that meets us when we first turn from the Old Testament to the New Testament is new indeed. We read of sects and parties unknown in the O.T. times: Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians. Who were these? We find Hebrew a dead language and Aramaic and Greek the languages of intercourse, culture and commerce. We find Palestinian cities bearing Greek names, and Persia long replaced by Rome as the power dominating the Land of Promise. We read of "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (James 1:1), otherwise known as the Dispersion. We discover that a Greek version of the Scriptures is in common use among the Jews, and that idolatry, the great snare of Israel in the O.T., is completely rooted out of the nation. We read of an Idumean reigning as king in Jerusalem and of an official Jewish council known as the Sanhedrin holding some form of religious and political power in the land. We even find that the temple in Jerusalem is not identical with the one we left in the O.T., and that far and wide among the Jews synagogues have come into existence as places of worship. Naturally we are curious about these things. Indeed, if we are to properly understand the N.T., we need some information about them.

HISTORY

The O.T. closes with Palestine still under Persian rule. A remnant of the Jewish people are in the land, but the majority are dispersed more as colonists than captives throughout the Persian Empire. In 333 B.C. Alexander the Great brought Syria under his control, and Palestine was merged into the growing empire of Greece. Upon the death of Alexander, the land became a

pawn in the power struggles of Syria and Egypt, being ruled by whichever power happened to be strongest at the time. The persecutions of the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes provoked the revolt of the Maccabees who led the Jews in a struggle for independence 167-141 B.C. This was followed by the rule of the Hasmonaeans, descendants of the Maccabees, until 63 B.C., when Pompey the Great conquered Palestine and brought the country under the iron rule of Rome. Christ was born in Bethlehem in the days of Caesar Augustus. This Caesar appointed Herod the Great as king after the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C., when Augustus overthrew the alliance of Anthony and Cleopatra of Egypt. Herod the Great ruled Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Perea, and Idumea, and was the king responsible for the massacre of the babes of Bethlehem shortly after the birth of Christ. Herod the Great also rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem which had not been ornate enough to suit his tastes. The entire reconstruction took about eighty-five years and was not fully completed until the time of Agrippa II.

IMPORTANT EVENTS BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

YEAR B.C.

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| 1. 334 B.C. —Alexander crosses the Hellespont | 5. 214 B.C. —The Great Wall of China begun |
| 2. 331 B.C. —Alexander defeats the Persians | 6. 175 B.C. —Apocryphal literature completed |
| 3. 323 B.C. —Alexander dies at age thirty-two in Babylon | 7. 169 B.C. —Epiphanes defiles the Temple on December 15 |
| 4. 260 B.C. —The translation of the Septuagint | 8. 166 B.C. —The revolt of the Maccabees |



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| 9. 165 B.C. —The cleansing of the Temple on December 25 | |
| 10. 146 B.C. —Destruction of Carthage by Rome and the end of the Punic Wars | 13. 37 B.C. —Herod is appointed to govern Jerusalem |
| 11. 63 B.C. —Pompey conquers Jerusalem | 14. 20 B.C. —The rebuilding and enlargement of the Temple |
| 12. 44 B.C. —Julius Caesar is assassinated in March | |

SECTS AND PARTIES

We frequently read of the SCRIBES in the Gospels. These men were held in high esteem by the Jewish people as the interpreters and teachers of the Scriptures. As a class they first came into prominence after the return of the captives from Babylon, Ezra himself being described as both a priest and a scribe. They were bitterly opposed to Christ and were frequently denounced by Him for making the Scriptures of no effect by their traditions. The PHARISEES were an influential Jewish sect which arose in the time of the Maccabees. They were originally a group of people who separated themselves from the ambitious political party in the nation. They were zealous guardians of the law and were conservative in belief, accepting both the supernatural and the concept of an after-life. The SADDUCEES on the other hand were rationalists, the liberals of their day, who denied the existence of spirits as well as the resurrection and the immortality of the soul. Numerically they were a much smaller group than the Pharisees and belonged for the most part to the wealthy, influential, priestly parties, the aristocracy of the Jewish nation. They also came into prominence during the days of the Maccabees. Both Pharisees and Sadducees opposed Christ, and those who did so were condemned by Him. The HERODIANS were in no sense a religious cult but were a political party who took their name from Herod and their authority from the Roman government. The Herodians looked upon Christ as a revolutionary and opposed Him on those grounds. The ZEALOTS were an extremist group who were fanatical defenders of the theocracy and engaged in acts of violence against the Romans. One of Christ's disciples might have been a Zealot (Matt. 10:4; Luke 6:15).

- Pharisees old-time Ritualists
- Sadducees old-time Rationalists
- Herodians old-time Secularists

The mark of the PHARISEE (the ritualist) is that he is always *ADDING TO*. He is not content with the written Word of God, and with the plain truth of the Gospel, and with the faith once for all delivered to the

saints. He must start adding his own ideas and ordinances.

On the other hand, the mark of the SADDUCEE (the rationalist) is that he is always *TAKING FROM*. He cannot accept the written Word of God in its entirety, nor the truth of the Gospel as it stands; nor can he accept, without drastic deletions, the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Everything must be tried at the bar of human reason. This, that, and the other things must be cut out to make faith reasonable and tenable. This was precisely the attitude of the Sadducee. He could not, or rather would not, believe either in angels or demons, either in the resurrection of the dead or in any other miracle.

As for the HERODIAN (the secularist) he cared neither for adding to nor taking from. Like the careless Gallio, he "cared for none of these things". The written Word of God, the message of the Gospel, the faith once for all delivered to the saints, were far from his first concern. His prime consideration was the life that is now. What does it matter that a heathen Herod reigns on a throne made crimson with crime so long as material interests are furthered? While the ritualist Pharisee was busy adding to, and the rationalist Sadducee was sceptically taking from, the secularist Herodian was heedlessly *PASSING BY*. We have all these types with us still today.

THE SANHEDRIN

In N.T. times the Sanhedrin was the supreme civil and religious body within the Jewish nation. The president of the Sanhedrin was the high priest, and twenty-three members composed a quorum. The body eventually known as the Sanhedrin likely came into existence during the Greek period of Palestinian history. It was dissolved during the Maccabean revolt, and was restored after the victorious conclusion of that struggle. The Sanhedrin had the right, granted by the Romans to pass sentence of death but not the right to execute it. Christ and later Peter, John, and Stephen were tried by the Sanhedrin.

THE SYNAGOGUE

During the Babylonian captivity the Jews, with no temple in which to worship, began to meet in smaller