

## Chapter One

### The Preparation for Jesus' Preaching

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Jesus of Nazareth was the world's Master Preacher. In the brief, momentous ministry he created the Christian pulpit and gave apostles direction for their later ministry. His success as a preacher should be measured both by his personal mastery of his audiences and by his creation of the ideals that have controlled homiletic methods of the writing and preaching of sermons in all ages. The Gospels present Jesus' ministry under the three aspects of teaching, preaching and miracles: "And Jesus went about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of disease and all manner of sickness among the people." Jesus' personality and custom, method and message drew the attention from all classes of people. His preaching was cast in the Oriental-Hebrew forms and was delivered to audiences varying in size from the single listener to the vast multitude.

Each age gives an interpretation to truth. It is the personal and individual process that determines the amount of appropriation of truth. The spirit of the task should not disregard the inheritance from the past nor be arrogant for our present attainments. The modern pulpit with its familiarity with the problems of the world has made possible a new interpretation and appreciation to Jesus as the Preacher rather than the Teacher. The Teacher Jesus has had abundant study and exposition both as to form and materials of teaching, but students of the homiletics of Jesus find themselves in pioneer territory and difficulties. The following series of studies will fulfill a high mission if a new outlook upon the ministry of Jesus may be afforded. The desirable justification for this effort to present the homiletics of Jesus might be found in three facts: the function of the teacher has materially departed from that of Jesus' times, requiring a present recasting of opinions; the present ideals of the pulpit conform better now than ever to those ideals that were behind the preaching of Jesus; the Gospels present Jesus in the work of preaching, teaching not being broad enough to compass his ministry. The Gospels describe the oral ministry of Jesus by the terms *teaching* (having 24 references) and *preaching* (14). Friend and foe gave Jesus the title of the "Teacher," while the true insight of the writers of the Gospels did not overlook the elements that made him *the Preacher*.

Teaching has for its purpose the instruction in principles and customs, whose acceptance may be reserved by the individual for his own convenience and deliberation; preaching has to do with the public announcement of truth with the intention to secure immediate response from the hearer. Both terms are used in the Gospels to record the same event, the distinctions in method and ideals are not constantly observed. The Gospel of Mark is most faithful to the shades of meaning here. The preaching of Jesus in methods and purpose is described by two Greek words, which mean "the proclamation of a herald" and "the publication of good tidings." While teaching and preaching would naturally contain common traits, it seems a worthy task to present the ministry of Jesus under the form of preaching, referring his theology and teachings upon great themes to the departments of theology and pedagogy. Preaching is the more comprehensive term.

The preaching of Jesus was related to certain forces of preparation. A preview of these is necessary to an appreciation of his ministry.

#### I. The Preparation of the Word

1. Political.—The territorial distribution of the nations of the civilized world contributed directly to the political preparation for the preaching of Jesus. Previous to the New Testament times many nations had accomplished their national mission and had gone to their graves with varied degrees of honor. To some of these not even the hope of an awakening in later upheavals was granted. Heroic deeds

had been recorded upon obelisks, pyramids, clay tablets and stones, the desire for national immortality reaching beyond the national tomb.

Historians now may call to their aid the results of archaeology in efforts to recast these ancient civilizations and to discover their separate contributions to the experience and progress of men. A correct philosophy of history would give honorable places to the Egyptian, the Assyrian, the Babylonian, the Hittite, and the Macedonian kingdoms, for they were rich and powerful in their day of glory, while special mention would come to the Hebrew nation as the most direct and influential contributor to the preparatory forces for Jesus' preaching.

In the New Testament times, five nations occupied the known world.

In the far East the Parthians had enlarged their national pride and joy in their recent success in stopping the eastward march of the hitherto victorious Roman legions.

In the extreme Northwest the German tribes were beginning to grow conscious of a common virility of character that was later destined to put new life into the world's political body.

In the center of civilization the Greeks had lost their national liberty to the Romans, but had found a high revenge in leading their captors into a captivity of culture, for the Romans adopted Greek ideas, philosophy, art, language and literature.

With the exception of the far East, Rome was the mistress of the known world. Pompey had returned from his victories in the East, and Cæsar had turned his attention to the Teutonic hordes that had already become a menace. Palestine was under Roman rule, for the Jewish theocracy had lost rulership in the Holy City, though retaining its immortal function as the world's schoolmaster in religion.

The Roman world holds chief interest for the student of the formative forces of the New Testament times. The internal condition of Rome exhibited the scars of intrigue and conflict. The Republic had come to an inglorious end after a bitter and turbulent course, for the dream of eternal supremacy had been rudely interrupted by the ambitions of Pompey and the Cæsars. The Roman eagle, once the emblem of liberty, now represented the Empire. The Civil Wars had ceased and the Gates of Janus, open in times of war, were now closed for the first time since the close of the Punic Wars. Cæsar Augustus was the master of the world and the head of Rome.

Roman imperialism, seeking to include the whole world under the dominion of the Eternal City, permitted the gospel of Jesus to secure diffusion throughout the whole world. Jesus found the world under one authority, since the far East remained in the untouched shadows of information and influence. From the banks of the Euphrates, whose willows in the long ago received the harps (Psalm 137:1-4), untouched and silent from sympathy with a captive people, the scepter of Rome reached westward over desert and fertile plain, river and mountain, even across the sea to beautiful Hispania, and men bowed the knee in sullen or ready obedience. A common voice of authority was heard amid the arid sands of Africa, whose very wastes yielded some tribute to the universal hand of greed, the echoes of this voice also coming afar from the Gallic hills of the North, where the impulse of freedom was beginning to quicken the pulse of these hardy sons of the forest. The peace of a supreme power over the nations gave a certain silence, in which could be heard the choral of the universal, spiritual peace of the "Gloria in Excelsis." Great roads, built from the capital to the provinces, allowed the Roman soldiery to keep in close touch with the outlying districts, thus compacting the system and affording opportunity and protection to travelers.

2. Social.—The social order of the Roman world furnished proper conditions for an evangel that might

guarantee the equalization of privileges and burdens. Mutual antipathy between the rich and the poor had been intensified; the former rejoiced in their luxuries and scorned their unfortunate neighbors; the latter groaned under mistreatment and trouble and were filled with envy and hatred for the favorites of prosperity; neither class regarded the rights of the other.

Slavery had depreciated the value of life by the very largeness of the number of dependents. It has been estimated that there were at this time six million slaves in the Empire. To this multitude of unfortunates add the two hundred thousand beggars fed by the bounty of the State, and the total results in a mass of restless malcontents who became a menace to the Empire and an appeal to the Gospel of Freedom.

Amid such discordant misery the Emperor's boast about his marble capital city would appear cruelly inhuman. The national amusement, favored by rich and poor, brought immense crowds to witness the gladiatorial contests, thereby cultivating an almost insatiable taste for blood and rewarding excesses of torture.

Successful commercialism with its ease and power followed this political unity of the known world. For the first time people enjoyed the opportunity for travel in order to seek health, recreation, and culture. Sacred shrines and places of special interest received visits from many pilgrims, while students flocked from all countries into the great universities. Provincialism in contact, customs and beliefs gave place to a cosmopolitanism that permitted the apostles to have a free and quiet entrance into any city, although they should bring a new religion.

The same story of degraded morals and ethical ideals is told by the Apostle Paul and the contemporary Roman writers. With Greek art, religion, and philosophy came also repulsive licentiousness, for the Romans could not have contact with the sensuous without becoming sensual. The common standard of decency had been lowered until the Roman writers sought to justify the current wickedness. The conquest of the world centralized in Rome all the vices of the conquered nations, Oriental and Greek sins combining to corrupt the Mistress of the World. Drunk with prosperity and power, Rome learned to condone the loss of purity among her men and women alike. Infanticide, drunkenness, gluttony, extravagance, debauchery of unmentionable sorts, and suicide were but commonplaces of sin, for which no one sought denial or blushed for the pollution.

The voice of a preacher of personal righteousness was needed to restore moral sanity and purity. The dense darkness of sin could be relieved only by that light which would bring a new life to men. The lesson of individual worth must be taught in order to give due regard to uprightness of character and proper regard for the oppressed.

3. Literary.—At the opening of the New Testament period the classic era of Greek literature lay three centuries in the past, while Rome had touched the outer rim of her Golden Age. Livy (acclaimed Roman historian, 59 BC – 17 AD) had just finished his works and Ovid was yet writing. The Stoic philosophy with its materialism and pantheism had developed the austere life, in which were lacking the gentle and noble emotions, while the Epicureans taught men to gratify every passion and to dull their senses to all but the grosser impulses. Greek and Roman classic literature did not contain the forces of moral reformation; they hastened the decay of national ideals of morality. The process of deterioration could be stopped only by a forceful personality with a regenerating message and power. The preaching of Jesus could fulfill this demand, for it could present both the ideal and the power for moral purity.

The history of oratory discovers the literary contribution to the preaching of Jesus. The pulpit is the distinctive product of Christianity. Other religions had commissioned prophet and priest with messages and ceremonials, for numberless deities received the popular worship at temples, shrines,

and altars. From the earliest times, spoken discourse—ranging from the brief outburst of passion to the developed oration—must have been employed to stir men to action, but Christianity gave to the preacher his vocation of turning men to right living through the means of oral discourse.

The greatest non-Semitic factor in the preparation for the preaching of Jesus was Grecian. The ideals of culture in Egypt, Babylonia, and Assyria did not enter Christian preaching, for these countries did not have sufficient molding influence upon the ancient Hebrews. The Greek orators easily became the world's teachers in oratory. The blind bard of Greece (Homer) with his matchless poetry had quickened the national appreciation of the power of the Greek language, while his success and poetry gave inspiration to later orators to strive for greater perfection in their work. The course of oratory increased in grandeur from the time of its crude awakening of conscious power until its culmination locally in Athens and personally in Demosthenes (384 - 322 BC). Schools of rhetoric were organized.

Three divisions may be observed in the history of Greek oratory, the purpose of each method determining the form of address. The *political oration* was concerned with the problems of statecraft, and the orator became the statesman. The *forensic oration* dealt with the more restricted matters of the civic community, in which legal and municipal interests centered, while the orator became the lawyer. The *declamatory oration* cultivated the art of criticism, whose type as censure or praise was received from the nature and purpose of the occasion of delivery, while the orator became the demagogue.

Greek oratory in its basic conceptions was differentiated from preaching by the religious element. The Greek orators did not appeal to the conscience to stir the individual to better living, did not alter the channels of the affections, and did not offer any initiative towards righteousness. The form of the sermon as a definite, well-articulated and purposeful address was contributed by Greek oratory, but the purpose and certain methods could not be suggested, because Greek oratory lacked the religious element. Roman oratory followed the Greek models and continued their defects. But Græco-Roman oratory accustomed the world to listen to serious public discourse. In this way the pulpit had its precursor.

After the conquest of Greece by Rome, the Greek language rapidly spread through the civilized world. It displaced all others for commercial and literary purposes, for it was flexible in construction, rhythmical, pictorial and philosophical, lending itself equally well to the needs of the poet, the lawyer, the merchant and the religionist. It won the place of the world's vernacular. Jesus found this world language well suited to his preaching, since it allowed 1) accurate presentation of truth, 2) vigorous and gentle appeals to the emotions, and 3) understanding by learned and ignorant. The reports of Jesus' preaching remain to us in the Greek; he probably spoke both Aramaic and Greek. Nazareth situated as a pass-through town would have afforded him opportunity for the language exposure.

Hebrew oratory was a lineal ancestor of Christian preaching. The prophet was the "seer" and the "announcer" of the message of Jehovah, method of reception and delivery of truth being indicated in these two words, descriptive of the holy office. The prophet was to receive a divine truth, mediated through dream, oral word, or *theophany* (from the Greek, *theophaneia*, meaning "appearance/showing of God"), and this should be the message for him to deliver. By the nature of his office and by the people's expectation the prophet was prohibited the personal element of his own opinions. "Thus says Jehovah" must preface the message in order to give it the imperative of duty and revelation. Emphasis was given to the subordination of the messenger. The Christian preacher inherits this prophetic acceptance of the divine initiation of the message, but he limits his ministry to the interpretation and enforcement of a revealed message, while the prophet was the medium of new revelations. Jesus was both Prophet and Preacher and excelled in both vocations.

Prediction of future and even remote events entered prophecy. Certain scholars have sought to

eliminate this predictive element upon the plea that the prophet could not have been able to forecast events and conditions, political or social and religious, of a century or more later than his own day. However, such a view overlooks the fact that the prophet and the people confessed that from Jehovah, not from man, came the vision, the man sometimes but dimly appreciating the full import of the message. Such recognition of the divine source removes predictive prophecy from the realm of human ignorance and errors.

Regardless of the method of communication, a divine revelation should guarantee its validity. Popular reception of this prophetic office and function in the day of Jesus prepared the way for his own ministry, which contained this predictive element. A few examples may be cited. He gave direction for the great draught of fish, he sent Peter to take the coin from the mouth of the fish, he told the disciples how to find the beast of burden in the city, and he mentioned the man with the pitcher of water. These forecasts could not have been keen guesses, though the events were in the immediate future. He more than once declared his approaching sufferings, death and resurrection; he warned his followers of harsh treatment and outlined the progress of the kingdom of heaven. Later Christian preachers, certain apostles excepted, have not possessed this predictive power.

Jesus also resembled the prophet in his appeal to his own generation. The prophet was a force for righteousness, daring to rebuke king and people for their personal and national sins and defection from the worship of Jehovah. Herein another line of preparation for the preaching of Jesus was found. With quiet but commanding dignity, Jesus brought to his own times sharp ethical rebukes and gracious invitations to a higher life. Suggestions were here made for the ministry of his successors who should stand in rough or ornamented pulpits, amid the hills or on the plains, in chapel or cathedral, to declare the gospel of the Nazarene. Hebrew prophecy accented this trait of the preacher.

A detailed account of the brilliant discourses of the prophets may not be given here, but may be listed in two great periods.

First Period—from the time of Samuel, 1050 B.C., to the time of Jeremiah, 629 B.C., including the ministries of Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Obadiah, Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and others less prominent.

Second Period—from the Exile, 605 B.C., to the close of the prophetic office, 433 B.C., embracing the work of Daniel, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Then followed four centuries of silence unbroken by a single prophetic voice.

The form of prophecy varied from the brief, pithy saying to the extended *discourse* (formal discussion of a topic). Illustrations and comparisons might adorn the address, while again it would be direct and bare. The audiences included kings, multitudes, and select individuals. The message stirred to political, martial, and religious action, warned the chosen nation against danger, enemies and death, comforted the fearful and troubled heart, and made Jehovah's presence very real to people. Jesus received this heritage of prophetic, oratorical method, rejoicing in his privilege to speak to a prepared people.

4. Religious.—In the New Testament times the Roman world worshiped the divinities of Greek and Roman origin. Their number was great and increased with the constant desire for new objects of worship. These divinities were largely deified men and women, who retained their human frailties and passions, though endowed with greater-than-human powers. Hero-worship reached its maximum privilege and value, since a heroic life or deed might result in a new deification.

Three ruinous results came from this method of making gods; the standard of deity was lowered

almost to earthly limits of personality; a debased view of sin was inevitable, since human depravity might be justified through appeal to the enmities and passions of the gods; skepticism readily increased and developed into disregard for worship and even passed into atheism, for such deities could not command constant belief in their own power or even their existence.

The final loss of temporal power sent the Jew throughout the Roman Empire to find relief from national dishonor in a commercialism to which the captors must look with respect and sometimes for aid. Every fair-sized city could boast of its Jewish colony, in which were observed the customs, traditions and worship handed down from the fathers. The nucleus of the Christian congregation was here preserved.

The Hebrew Scriptures were written by a large number of men, separated by long periods of time. These writings were gradually gathered into one collection and became the canon, or rule of faith. The office of the prophet ended with Malachi. The interpretation of truth then became the duty of the religious teacher. The rabbis, teachers, masters, doctors, lawyers and scribes belonged to this class of interpreters. New conditions of religious service gave rise to this profession.

The Exile had cured the Jews of the sin of idolatry, while national and religious zeal grew tense under political distress and servitude. To these discontented people the message of Jehovah, with the mingling of the individual and personal promises with the theocratic hopes, would strongly appeal. These leaders instructed the people along certain religious lines, and the success of especially brilliant men led to the formation of schools of interpretation with different methods of teaching the Scriptures. Sects arose partly from this variety of instruction and partly from the political misfortunes of the Jews. Here are to be classed the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, and the Essenes, from all of whom some kind of preparation was derived for the preaching of Jesus.

The synagogue furnished the initial place and certain forms of worship for the ministry of Jesus. The time and place of origin of the synagogue may not be accurately determined, but it increased in numbers and influence after the return of the Jews from the Exile under the leadership of Nehemiah in 445 B.C. The Exile had corrupted the Hebrew language into its Aramaic dialect, while the Scriptures still remained in the Hebrew, which was not spoken by those of the people who were born in and after the Exile. Tradition credits Ezra with the crude beginning of the custom of the synagogue worship, when he assembled the people to hear the newly-discovered copy of the Law. "And the Levites caused the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. They read in the book, in the law of God, distinctly; and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading." It is highly probable that an Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew was given for the benefit of those who did not fully understand the ancient Hebrew text.

## II. The Preparation of the Preacher

1. His home life.—The personal preparation of Jesus the preacher began in his home life. Through his mother his ancestry continued the blood of King David. The "Magnificat" reveals the tender and poetic graces of his mother, whose refinement of feeling and largeness of faith in God must have had their pre-natal culture upon the child Jesus. Though probably not different from the ordinary home of the peasant class in its arrangements, this home must have been specially ennobled by the great expectation that spiritualized the days of Mary and Joseph, who could not forget their extraordinary visions and experiences.

The boy Jesus enjoyed the advice and training of pious parents, the home life of the Jews being especially careful of the religious hopes of the children. Companionship with other children in the home and village would preserve the naturalness of youth in Jesus. The Gospels confirm their greatness over the Apocryphal Gospels in the sanity of the records about Jesus. There are no extravagant stories of youthful marvels.

2. His education.—Jesus probably attended the village school of Nazareth, the curriculum not being very extensive. His course here could not have been very prominent, nor did he go abroad to study in any famous rabbinical school, for the critics of his ministry charged him with the failure to learn letters, while they were astonished at his learning.

Jesus probably knew three languages. The current language of the Jews of Palestine was Aramaic, a dialect of the Hebrew; as a Jew he would inherit his native tongue and begin its use at his mother's knee. His familiarity with the Old Testament in the original Hebrew shows his knowledge of the ancient Hebrew. Mary and Joseph doubtless taught him this language, for it was not an uncommon thing for pious Jews to learn to read their sacred writings. Greek was the vernacular of the civilized world, the contact of the streets being a sufficient teacher.



The boy Jesus would occasionally get a report of the topics of world-wide interest, as some traveler might pass through his town. After his twelfth year the annual visit to Jerusalem would have great educational value, for pilgrims from all parts of the world would discuss many subjects interesting to a boy, while the journey itself would suggest many historic places and incidents in the life of his people. All these forces helped in his mental and spiritual development, but his chief source of growth lay beyond the direction of earthly teachers.

3. Silent years at Nazareth.—Only one brief glimpse of Jesus comes to us from those 30 years at Nazareth. The silence of communion with the unseen verities enfolds this period of preparation. Speculation might suggest many questions, but his daily life would not appear more fully opened to us, even were such questions answered. His social life brought him into contact with men who were sinners, for Nazareth had gained the unenviable reputation indicated in the slur of the interrogatory, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" He could develop his inner life through meditation and prayer, being free from the rush and confusion of the world. His public life indicated habits that doubtless began in youth.

4. Consciousness of the divine.—Jesus had the largest preparation for his ministry in his consciousness of the divine will and revelation. His appreciation of his Messianic vocation may have been gradual, but it had come to full fruition by the opening of his public work. The Father must have given frequent and intimate communications to the Son in his days of development for his singular task for a sinful world. Students may not violate the sacredness of the union of the human and the divine forces that entered into the personality of Jesus. One may confidently affirm that Jesus received his best preparation for his ministry from the fact of his being the Son of God and the Son of man. In this realm of glorious mystery lay his immeasurable greatness as a thinker and preacher.

( End of Chapter One – The Preparation for Jesus' Preaching )