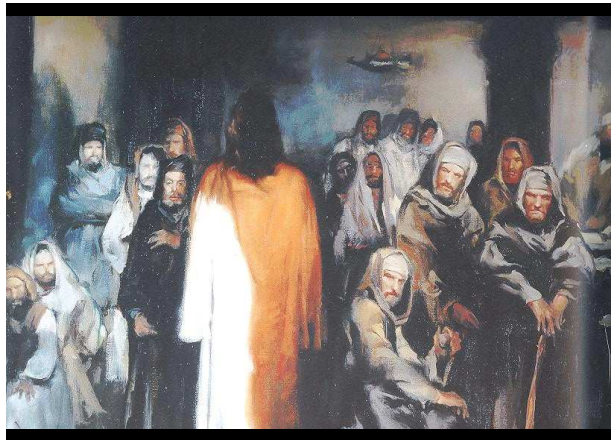


Chapter Ten

The Polemics of His Preaching

The vocation of the Son of man called forth the jealous hatred and the unreasonable opposition of the religious leaders. He came to voice the truth and the will of the Father, hence he could not conform his message to the current standards, nor could he stultify his own incarnation and mission of service through submission to personal fear of the enemies of his cause. The Preacher became the strategist and *polemist* (one who engages in strong, controversial debate).

Because of his singular character and his supreme purpose to do the will of God with unparalleled faithfulness, Jesus entered into contest with his foes, preferring that the battle should lead to the Cross rather than to fail to fulfil his call to Saviorhood and seeing in this method the ultimate victory. His polemics continue the unique grandeur of his preaching. To a better appreciation of this homiletical element this study is offered.



I. Topical Polemics

1. Nationalism.—The topical polemical element of Jesus' preaching was fundamental to his attitude toward his

contemporaries. The spirit of nationalism, which *arrogated* (to take or claim for oneself without justification) to itself a monopoly of the divine blessings and declared that birth in Israel brought heavenly favors, dominated the Jews at the time of Jesus. These children of Abraham, whom God had called to father a nation like unto the stars in number, thought that the red blood of kinship to their ancient ancestor gave them part in the deathless kingdom of faith and love.

Jehovah's election of Israel to become the favored and elect nation was an election to service rather than to privilege, since Israel should become the channel of divine revelation to all the world. The voice of Jehovah, heard in Israel for direction in righteousness, duty and worship, should have a far echo as the peculiar people should bear the messages that should bring all nations to have contact with the God of Israel. This little nation was destined to become the world's schoolmaster whose lessons should first come from the Lord of hosts.

The history of Israel abounds in illustrations of lapses from this holy vocation. The great prophets were missionary in their conceptions of the proper place for Israel's religion, which deserved something better than a provincial Judaism. But the

religious leaders had perverted their national mission into a narrow nationalism, that desired all favors to be directed through, if not limited to, Israel.

This spirit of nationalism had so far developed race bigotry and selfishness that by the New Testament times the Jews regarded their rights to the kingdom of God unquestioned. Individual fitness in character for such a holy inheritance and personal resemblance to Abraham beyond form and feature did not enter their minds. They considered that Jehovah had obligated himself to redeem the seed of Abraham, and they had forgotten the positive distinction of the prophets between the natural and the spiritual Israel, the true and the false, the external and the unseen. The spiritual message of Jesus demanded a vital contact with God and thus was likely to bring the Preacher into sharp conflict with these leaders who could not tolerate the broad view of their real destiny.

Against this formalism in piety, in which the imperative of personal merit was not the condition of the divine reward and approval, against this monopoly of the divine blessings, which localized in Israel and her customs the power and presence of God, Jesus delivered his spiritual and universal message and declared that birth from Abraham must be followed by birth from God's Spirit, and that the limits of God's kingdom of love and service were the ends of the earth, since there the sinful and needy ones would be found. Divine love is commensurate with the penitent needs of a lost world. Israel had neglected her day of opportunity.

2. Bibliolatry.—The Judaism of Jesus' day had really come into a bibliolatry which exalted the sacred literature into a false position of authority and reverence.

The Old Testament was written to record the history of God's dealings with men in his effort to reveal the proper forms of truth and worship. It is a marvelous summary of patient instruction in righteousness, of merciful leadership of the select nation, and of revelations of God's character. It was intended to serve as a guidebook to Israel in matters religious, and through Israel to the heathen world. Born of the prophetic and national experiences, outlining the course of history through the guiding hand of God, containing the aspirations of the pious soul in communication with its God, and bringing directly the divine correctives and approvals to men, this sacred book was designed and fitted to have a permanent value and message both to Israel and the Gentiles. History, prophecy, psalmody, and wisdom-sayings were to enter through Israel's help into the system of divine *pedagogy* (the profession, science, or theory of teaching) for all men.

The primary purpose of the Old Testament was to prepare the world for Christ as the Savior from sin. The records of those far-away days of primitive men teach the progress of the providential order until the election of Abraham to become the father of the faithful through whose seed might be redeemed the promise of the Prot-evangelium (Genesis 3:15). Out of the worldly Israel the pious remnant could be gathered to preserve the ever-increasing revelations about the Coming One. Legislation, types and symbols, prophecy and proverb should serve to discipline Israel to be ready to know and receive the Messiah who should redeem his people and be the light to the Gentiles. The blood of bulls and lambs would have been vain libations without more vitality for righteousness than heathen sacrifices unless

they looked intentionally and primarily to "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." Upon Calvary focused the lines of Hebrew history and revelation.

Herein may be found the permanent and spiritual value of the Old Testament. Omit Christ as the definite and sufficient end, and these sacred books would contain but the story of national failure and unrealized religious aspirations.

But the Jews exalted their Book into a virtual idolatry. This bibliolatry—regard for the book rather than for its message—resulted from the literalism in interpretation; it produced two tendencies, one regarding the letter of supreme importance in matters of obedience, the other fixing undue weight to the mass of historic opinions of the rabbis who had interpreted the sacred text. The sacredness of the text demanded absolute obedience to its form and forbade popular attempts to discover its spiritual meaning. Rabbinical opinions, hoary with age and dusty with uninteresting thoughts, claimed the same consideration as the text of Scripture. These two tendencies, widely received and respected, led to formal piety, commendable and sufficient, even though the heart might be filled with unholy passions.

Jesus sought to restore the Old Testament to its rightful place as the authority for the spirit of worship. With the current book worship he contrasted the incarnation of truth in the experience of the worshiper, who might not be approved simply for external righteousness. The Book should pass from revered parchment into a living, heart-stirring, directive message from God to men and women in their sorrows and sins.

Jesus thereby antagonized the religious teachers, the custodians of knowledge, who were satisfied with a bibliolatry while the poor penitent sinner hungered for the bread of life. God had spoken in many ways to the heart of men, and now it benefitted men to answer him in the heart's appreciation and obedience. Thus would be completed the double movement of true worship.

Jesus did not attempt to galvanize the corpse into action; he came to impart a new life for the spirit, and this privilege of newness of life would come to Israel and the individual upon the same condition; there must be personal, spiritual union with himself and the Father through the work of the Holy Spirit. For the religion of the letter he substituted that of the spirit, for bibliolatry he offered the worship of the Person.

3. Messianism.—The Messianic Hope was an essential part of the religious and civic ambitions of Israel. Jesus rebuked with discriminative fairness and sharpness the current Messianism. The Old Testament had created the hope that Jehovah would one day send the Messiah, his Anointed, his Christ, to redeem Israel, the terms of the redemption varying with the needs and dispositions of times and seers, but with the abiding assurance that Jehovah would really come to the help of his people. One may study with profit the prophetic growth and delineations of this Hope, but the present purpose is concerned with the degraded Messianism which called forth the rebukes of Jesus and which interfered with his mission.

The current hope had fallen from the permanent and true ideal of God's reign in righteousness and deliverance to the demand for a kingdom of worldwide power and glory, bringing shame to the Mistress of the World (Rome). The Messianic kingdom should attain victorious militarism and honor. The Maccabean struggles for national liberty and the continued oppression of Rome had accented this temporal ideal that had its vision of restored Jerusalem, rich, powerful and supreme. Each party in the nation interpreted the good effects to come from the new order in harmony with party ideals, but the Pharisee, the Sadducee, the Herodian, and the Nationalist, differing in their details of Messianic programs, agreed in the general expectation of a temporal kingdom, while the common people were willing to receive any deliverer from their burdens both civic and religious. Differences in details made more pronounced the unity of demand for a military hero.

Jesus attacked this debased Messianism. He hurled his invectives at the false leaders, he presented his more spiritual and exalted ideals for the Messiah, and invited contact with God through his mediation; but the political and religious parties continued to look to the future for their great man. As the substitute for the current Messianism with its dependence upon the throne of gold and an army of legions he presented the personal sovereignty of God, their King, whose fellowship for the oppressed and suffering subjects would be attested in his own Calvary and whose limits of reign would reach the most distant and humble heart of faith.

The Twelve, blessed with nearness to his person and honored with the commission of the apostolate, did not surrender their cherished ambitions for preferment in a worldly kingdom until the resurrection of their King had confirmed the spirituality of his message and mission. The specter of a dead hope flitted before the disciple as he spoke to his unknown Lord on the Emmaus road: "But we hoped that it was he who should redeem Israel." They could not see beyond the historic method of earthly power and redemption. Israel had often celebrated freedom from enemies through a divinely sent judge or king. The memory of the past and the carnal hopes for the future fashioned the image of the desired Messiah.

II. Aggressive Polemics

1. Humble origin.—Jesus faced bravely and repeatedly the aggressive polemics of his foes. Upon his second visit to his old home at Nazareth, he astonished the people by his wisdom and mighty works, but his enemies sought to find the secret of his power; their failure, the consequent chagrin, and their natural hatred of one so far from their own low standards led them to declare that his humble origin would preclude him from greatness.

Jesus' enemies could not understand him, for they could not see how his family life could have fruited in divinity. Out of their daily fellowship with his kinsfolk, they brought the family type of thought and life for Jesus, but he was not to be limited thus to the cottage outlook upon the world; his was the royal mind. His enemies *adduced* (cited as evidence) his peasant birth and rearing as sufficient proofs of his mediocrity, because they regarded position in life as unquestionable evidence of heaven's blessing. Lowly in birth but of royal blood, quiet in dress and deportment, simple in his severe conditions of discipleship, and spiritual in his own religious life,

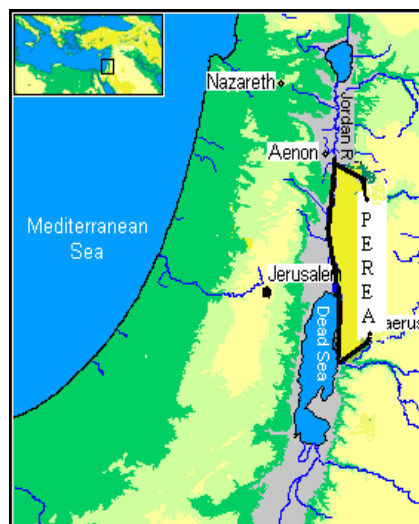
Jesus failed to receive the hero worship from these charlatans, who preferred show to character and loud professions to simple goodness.

This change of humble origin was repeated at the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus produced his usual wonder in the popular mind. The rabbis combined this charge of lowly birth with that of disregard for the rabbinical schools. He could not be a real teacher of worth because he had never learned from them. In these teachers of reputation resided all the sources of truth and wisdom, the ignorant proving themselves such by neglect of these fountains of mental life. But this popular Preacher had never matriculated in these schools, he had refused their literary training. Such presumption and disrespect were unpardonable. The masses must be warned against this bigoted Preacher, for he would profit by the same popular credulity that had given them their influence.

2. Popularity.—Jesus had attracted such notice and had gained so large a following by the time of the Feast of Tabernacles in 29 A.D. as to arouse the anxiety as well as the hatred of his enemies. His popularity was indicated in their charge that “he leads the multitude astray.” Fear of the people, whose favorite Jesus was at the time, prevented any open measures toward disturbing his ministry, but their eyes were open to see the *propitious* (favorable) time to end the career of this miracle-working Preacher.

Popularity is a variable factor in maintaining a career, but it was with Jesus at this time. A year later, and just before Jesus’ last visit to Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin plotted his death upon the plea of his popularity. “If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him.” The occupation of the religious leaders was in jeopardy, for the crowds were seeking the new Preacher whose ideas differed so materially from theirs. They were not ready for the self-abasement of John the Baptist whose joy was fulfilled in the greater success of his Master. The charge of popularity was intended to arouse envy and bitterness toward Jesus. His very success was used to hurt him and to hinder his cause.

3. Associations.—Three times his enemies sought to destroy Jesus’ influence by the base insinuation that his company was not in keeping with his holy profession. Upon the occasion of Matthew’s feast the scribes and Pharisees murmured that Jesus should eat with the publicans and the sinners, for these leaders considered the touch of such people defiling. Jesus answered the unspoken criticism of another host, Simon the Pharisee, whose lack of hospitality gave the observant and gentle Preacher the opportunity to commend the footbath of tears which the woman of sin offered as her tribute of love to her Lord. It was probably in **PEREA** that the publicans and sinners sought Jesus, and “both the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’”



These self-satisfied and bigoted teachers of religion, to whom all attention and honor had come from the higher classes of the people, felt slighted because Jesus preferred the company of the despised classes from whom they had been cut off by the ordinary demands of social decency, since their call from God to be religious leaders had not included the need to risk their reputations and to offend their tastes. They were too good to associate with the sinners even for the missionary impulse.

The serenity of Jesus under such suggestions only increased the anger of his foes, who could not understand his motive for compassionate interest in these unfortunates. Their own narrow experiences with temptation and sin led them to postulate the same standards for Jesus. But Pharisaical hatred and insinuations could not deter this Preacher with the divine heart from giving both *succor* (assistance and support in times of hardship and distress) and himself to these helpless and friendless sinners.

4. League with evil.—Shortly after leaving the home of Jairus in Capernaum, Jesus healed a dumb demoniac. The people marveled at his power, attributing it to God; "but the Pharisees said, 'By the prince of the demons casts he out demons.'" At the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus charged the crowds with plotting his death, and "the multitude answered, 'You have a demon: who seeks to kill you?'" At this feast Jesus claimed for his own words the same authority as for God's words. "The Jews answered and said unto him, 'Say we not well that you are a Samaritan, and have a demon?'"

This charge of being in cooperation with the prince of demons was repeated later in Perea. Such a charge turned the holy life and power of Jesus into service for Satan, thereby identifying the Holy Spirit, through whom the ministry of miracles had been performed, with the evil forces. It was after such a charge that Jesus declared that the sin without pardon was the transgression against the Holy Spirit.

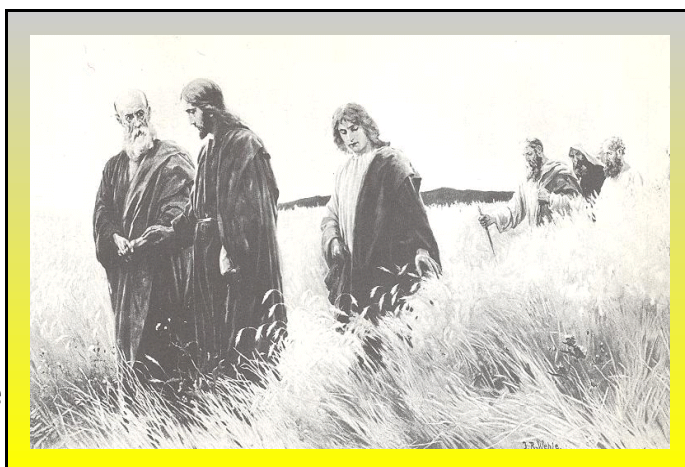
5. Blasphemy.—Three times his enemies declared that Jesus was a blasphemer. Jesus assured the poor paralytic in Capernaum, when the roof had been removed to provide a way to the miracle-worker, that his sins would be forgiven; the scribes and the Pharisees said that Jesus had usurped the divine *prerogative* (rightful privilege) and had therefore blasphemed. The healing of the cripple at the Pool of Bethesda brought from Jesus the statement that his Father worked and that he but imitated his example; the Jews denied his equality with God as a blasphemy. At the Feast of Dedication, Jesus claimed oneness with the Father, and the Jews sought to stone him, for they did not see the mystic union, which could be appreciated only by the faith in Jesus which they rejected. The current demand for naturalistic standards of judgment for Jesus forbade any but this criticism of blasphemy. If he had been simply a man, their charge would have been just and needful, but, since he was the Son of God, their enmity led them into disobedience to God's provision of grace. The accused went his way of shame to his glory and honor; his accusers missed their eternal joy and peace.

6. The traditions.—From the Pharisaical viewpoint the severe charge of disregard for the traditions would have been quite sufficient to condemn Jesus as unworthy

(of) the respect of the nation. To the Old Testament there had been added numerous customs as the outgrowth of the interpretations of the sacred text. In the course of time these traditions gathered the weight of authority because of their age and their high source in the opinion of learned scholars. The Book itself must be either interpreted according to these traditions or disregarded. Harsh and unreasonable, *puerile* (childishly silly) and foolish, these customs fell under the censure of Jesus both through his spoken word and through neglect to follow them. His mind was fixed upon the essentials of life and truth. The prevailing attitude of scribes and Pharisees differed materially from that of Jesus, for he regarded these traditions as hindrances to faith and service to God and men.

Twice the murmur of discontent was distinctly heard because Jesus and his disciples ate without bathing the hands. This charge was so primal and condemnatory as to call for a special embassy to come from Jerusalem to Galilee to present it and thereby to create hatred and opposition to Jesus. Six times the

lovers of the past *preferred* (formally submitted) against Jesus the charge of Sabbath desecration. The hungry disciples were not conscious sinners when they plucked the ripe grain, nor did the Son of man intend to become a transgressor of the divine law when he performed the five miracles



of healing on the Sabbath, but the critics were loud in their denunciations. These narrow and selfish formalists had exalted the external conformity to law to the extent that allowed them to behold the sufferings of fellow-men without alleviation of (hunger) pains on the Sabbath, but their mercenary plans required attention to their beasts. Money was more than men.

The heart of Jesus heard the cry of distress and his brave soul did not falter even in the face of bitter opposition and unjust charges. He saw the higher law of service; his enemies were too entranced with the letter to appreciate the spirit of their sacred books.

7. Authority.—The word of Jesus rang with a new and an unexpected note of authority, which irritated the leaders while it drew the people. The current oratory was but the delivery of the thoughts of dead men, the vigor of life and the freshness of individual composition being absent from the discourses. The lessons of the long ago were conned with senseless veneration but with comparative popular favor.

This new Preacher entirely passed the 'heroes of thought,' not once quoting from the favorite authors in his own support. He seemed to cast the slur of silence upon these honored teachers. He did not even seem conscious of his disrespect, so

confident was he that his own word was of absolute authority and compulsion for conscience. The doctors of the law repelled this new note in public address, but this fact did not alter the form of Jesus' sermons or deter him from speaking the message of the Father.

III. Defensive Polemics

1. Silence.—Jesus had the grace of silence. He could see the unspoken criticisms and hear the murmurs, and yet his calm dignity and great reservation of speech would not be disturbed. The person of rare gifts of control can quietly endure *calumnies* (false and defamatory statements made about someone) and evil reports. He could have justified all his deeds, but he often chose the polemics of silence. The records show that he passed in silence two charges of being in league with evil, one for blasphemy, and one for popularity. With severe sarcasm, with appeal to the Scriptures, or with argument he might have met his critics, but his success might have puffed up the opponents with the thought of having disturbed and provoked to anger this popular Preacher, while his silence would enrage them, since few people can forgive the silence of neglect. (Editor's note: contrast to John the Baptist's belligerent answering a question over what was "lawful" with his subsequent charging an absent Herod with a law transgression—it saw John get arrested on the spot.)

2. The sign.—The demand for signs was unheeded by Jesus except as he gave his polemics this method. He would not be forced to attest his heavenly vocation by the heavenly sign, but he would bring confusion to his foes by citation of events that served as signs. Neither popular desire nor official command could induce him to work a miracle as a sign. He offered signs that should have been perceived. His first cleansing of the Temple caused his critics to request his authority in an attesting sign. Jesus said: Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Only deeper rage filled his foes, who could not appreciate this beautiful imagery of his approaching death and resurrection, as indeed neither did his disciples. The contact with the Risen Lord was needed to enlighten his beloved band. Near Magadan the Sadducees combined with their religious antagonists in attempting to entrap Jesus with the request for a sign. Jesus answered with the reference to the weather forecasts and the sign of Jonah. The speech of nature they could interpret, but that of history and divine providence through the Messiah they missed.

3. Miracles.—Jesus occasionally defended himself against certain charges through his miracles. He aroused extreme enmity and its sharp expression when he announced forgiveness of sins to the paralytic of Capernaum. He met the charge of blasphemy with an immediate cure of the forgiven man. To forgive sins would not require greater power than to cure the incurable. "But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins (then says he to the sick of the palsy), Arise, and take up your bed, and go unto your house." The glad obedience of the man could not escape the notice of the multitude. (Editor's note: how fortunate this man was, to have *both* spiritual cleansing and physical healing all begin at the same moment in time! How his face must have shone with a brightness! Contrast this with the sour and ugly countenances of the Pharisees who witnessed all with their disapproval.) He demonstrated the true Sabbath

observance in contrast to the Pharisaical method by healing the withered hand and the dropsical man. A normal body and a released sufferer would be greater honor to the day of rest than restrictions against gathering sticks.

4. The Scriptures.—The Old Testament furnished Jesus with polemical material both in historical events and declared truths. The people theoretically regarded the Scriptures as authoritative, but they had been shut off from a vital touch with this body of truth because the leaders taught opinions about the Scriptures rather than the text itself. Jesus' appeal to the Word brought a new instrument of debate and warfare. He referred to prominent incidents in the life of David, Moses, and Abraham, and made quotations from Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and the Psalms for polemical purposes. To the chosen nation this argument should have been most convincing.

5. Formal argument.—I have noticed 22 examples of Jesus' use of formal argument in his polemics. He was the master of formal *dialectics* (enquiry with logic into truthfulness of opinion), for his knowledge of the processes of reasoning was accurate and complete, while his immediate insight into the mind of his opponent comprehended every impulse and unspoken thought and intention. To him the task was easy and his foes could not repel his arguments that were based upon their inmost purposes. They could not deceive or entrap him. The ordinary rhetorical forms of argument were used. The multitudes often witnessed the enforced silence of the scribes and Pharisees, who could not answer the intellectual keenness of Jesus. Failing to meet his arguments, they resorted to the baser argument of intrigue and persecution.

IV. Individualized Polemics

Jesus showed his greatness as a polemist in his personalized polemics, for the human passions here come to direct contest with the sincere purity of Jesus. Common foes enter conspiracies against the Preacher, forgetting their own quarrels in the greater hatred for the commanding person who was about to take complete mastery of the religious situation in Israel.

The special combatants in the war of words and ideas in Jesus' polemics appear once in each of these *nine cases*:

- A ruler of the synagogue
- The collectors of the Temple tax
- The Sadducees
- The Pharisees and Herodians
- The Pharisees and Sadducees
- Simon the Pharisee
- The lawyers and Pharisees
- The chief priests and scribes
- The chief priests with scribes and elders;

twice in each of these cases, the chief priests and Pharisees, a lawyer; six times, the Pharisees with their scribes; seven times, the Pharisees without further aid; eight times, the Jews without further distinction of classes.

These combinations are suggestive of the *dire* (extremely serious, urgent) necessity that befell the enemies of Jesus to marshal every force of evil, formalism, nationalism, religious bigotry, class pride and selfish protection of profession in order that Jesus might not gain entire control over the religious customs and beliefs.

The Pharisees were the natural and prominent leaders in the effort to ruin the reputation of Jesus and to put him to death. Their prominence in this respect is recorded as many as 18 times. Reasons for this bitterness toward Jesus may be found in the fact that his theological outlook differed so radically from theirs; his simplicity and spirituality rebuked their customs and their formalism. Another source of bitterness came from their fear that he would displace them in popular favor and thus destroy their profession as teachers. (Editor's note: I've never seen it discussed concerning the livelihood of Pharisees and scribes as to their income. They gave long prayers for widows in grief and this may have something to do with their tithing anise, cumin, etc.; the spices women might have on hand.) It was not difficult for the Pharisees to perceive that the new kingdom of Jesus' outline was not broad enough to include their hypocrisy, for the essential requirement of participation in this kingdom looked to the heart rather than to the outward acts.

The common people seldom take the initiative in opposition to a great person; it takes the demagogue to arouse general prejudice and to direct the conflict. Jerusalem was the logical center of this storm. Then came Capernaum and Perea. All parts of the Holy Land with the exception of Samaria served as the field for this battle royale.

On the one side were the forces of formalism in religion and the accredited leaders of opinion, combinations of all the interested parties, who saw their own prestige decline with the success of Jesus; on the other side stood the Man of Galilee with a few obscure followers who could but add responsibility to himself. There are no monuments to mark the scenes of conflict, there are no remnants of sword and shield; but the historian of religion and life marks these days as pivotal in the destiny of men.

V. Oratorical Polemics

The oratorical polemics of Jesus may be found in the fragmentary sayings and the 21 discourses that may be classed strictly as polemical in tone and purpose. In these discourses, delivered on five occasions, were eleven parables and four miracles connected with them. Two of these discourses dealt with the charge of being in league with Beelzebub and three with the question of the Sabbath. Jesus did not allow himself to be betrayed into an unguarded or ill-timed remark, his enemies being constantly on the watch for such lapses. His oratorical polemics show his judgment in the selection and grouping of his thoughts so that he might accomplish his mission and deliver his message even in the face of organized and wicked opposition.

(End of Chapter Ten – The Polemics of His Peaching)