SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY OF RHETORIC AND MATTHEW’S GOSPEL

Author: Craig S. Keener

Affiliations: 1Department New Testament, Palmer Theological Seminary of Eastern University, United States of America 2Graduate School of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to: Craig Keener
ckees@eastern.edu

INTRODUCTION

The study of rhetoric has flourished in Pauline studies (e.g. Anderson 1999; Classen 2002; Pogoloff 1992; Smit Sibinga 1997; 35–54; Winter 1997) and elsewhere. Although sometimes raised with respect to the Gospels (the work most often cited as seminal is Robbins 1992), its application has been limited and much room remains for further work. In this article, I merely offer some suggestions for directions for continued study. I will argue that while application of principles from Graeco-Roman handbooks will offer some new insights, study of Jewish sage rhetoric, though technically an ‘old’ approach, holds even greater promise for the future. I draw here especially on my work in my commentary on Matthew (Keener 2009a: passim, but especially 22–23).

All persuasion is, of course, rhetorical in a general sense and one can use Graeco-Roman rhetorical categories to classify and evaluate much persuasion. But not all texts seem equally well designed for such categories, as will be clear from critical patristic comments, offered after the rise of the Second Sophistic, about biblical rhetoric. Styles of Graeco-Roman argumentation and many rhetorical devices pervaded public speech, whether in assemblies or on street corners, in Hellenised and Romanised cities; they therefore shaped the character of argumentation in such settings. Nevertheless, many geographic areas also retained elements of indigenous cultures or traditional rhetorics and we could expect a confluence of approaches, or even a dominance of traditional approaches, in these areas.

GRAECO-ROMAN RHETORIC

While Matthew’s Gospel is (in my opinion) clearly Jewish, this conclusion need not entail the a priori irrelevance of Graeco-Roman rhetoric. If Matthew writes among Jewish followers of Jesus in urban Syria, perhaps Antioch, he could write for a somewhat Hellenised Jewish subculture; not only the Greek language in which he likely wrote, but also his adoption or adaptation of the Greek genre of biography, following Mark and probably other authors, allow for Greek influence.

There are numerous examples of surviving biographies within a few decades after the Gospels, and as well as some other sources much earlier. Examining the literary techniques of rhetorically trained writers of histories and biographies could, therefore, provide useful insights into Matthew’s own writing style and I sought to provide numerous such comparisons in my commentary on Matthew. Most ancient biographies, such as Matthew, tended to provide some new insights, study of Jewish sage rhetoric, though technically an ‘old’ approach, holds even greater promise for the future. I draw here especially on my work in my commentary on Matthew (Keener 2009a: passim, but especially 22–23).

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ABSTRACT

Because the Gospel writers addressed audiences in the Graeco-Roman world with various degrees of familiarity with standard rhetoric, rhetoric provides a helpful check on modern speculations about ancient speech and argument. Nevertheless, parallels with such rhetoric in Matthew, helpful as they are, tend to occur at a more general level and rarely on the level of specific wording. A more fruitful endeavour may be a comparison with rhetorical techniques in other ancient biographies. Beyond general urban Mediterranean rhetoric, however, a specific style of rhetoric emerges within Jesus’ teachings. Because Matthew contains so much material about Jesus the Galilean sage, examining Jewish sage rhetoric proves particularly helpful for understanding his work and that of the traditional material on which he draws.


2. Talbert (1977:2–3) observes that Strauss, Bullmnn (see 1968:372, 2005:547) and their followers rejected the biographical category because they confused ancient with modern biography.

3. Foster (1998:146–147) argues that modern narrative frequently clots a killing structure; it is not just a time machine, but it is a narrative time machine.

4. Notably Cornelius Nepos in the late-2nd century BCE.

5. For insights from rhetorical history for Acts (where it is much more directly relevant than in Matthew), see Rothfeld 1992; for exploratory approaches to Greco-Roman rhetoric in some gospel materials, see, for example, Mack and Robbins 1989.

6. For example, in ancient biography, over 150 citations from Diogenes Laertius, nearly 80 from the pre-Christian writer Cornelius Nepos, roughly 50 from Plutarch’s Lives, over 60 from Arrian’s life of Alexander, nearly 40 from Suetonius; in historiography, nearly 200 from Diodorus Siculus, nearly 170 from Dionysius of Halicarnassus and so forth. Among comparisons with rhetorically sophisticated writers, the index of my original Matthew commentary lists roughly 80 citations of Cicero, 37 of Theon, over 20 of the Rhetorica ad Herennium, nearly 50 of Quintilian, over 50 of Isocrates, over 60 of Demosthenes and so forth. Admittedly, these references involve content as well as technique, hence are not all rhetorical or literary observations per se (many are more social).
to be arranged more topically than chronologically.7 Like the Gospels, biographers frequently sought to teach moral lessons from their sources,8 one might in a sense learn from great teachers of the past by proxy, as students of their recorded teachings (Robbins 1992:10–11). Theological perspectives, too, drew ancient works of these kinds.9 Some narrative techniques, such as suspense, appear in a variety of ancient narrative genres.10

These comparisons do not imply that we should think that Matthew had rhetorical training or necessarily even consciously imitated the elite biographers and historians whose works remain extant. They simply provide a concrete criterion for evaluation that is more culturally relevant than purely modern speculations about how ancients should have written. Thus one could compare with Graeco-Roman rhetorical various examples in Matthew’s Gospel:

- After an introduction, speeches of praise could ideally address a person’s genealogy (cf. Mt 1:1–2; Rhetorica ad Alexandram 35, 1440b.23–24; see e.g. Tacitus Agricola 4.1);11
- Respectable ancestry was praiseworthy, hence could be used in introducing a person’s life (e.g. Xenophon Ages. 1.2; Euphrasius Lince 496; Gorgias Hel. 3);12
- Birth was often the first subject in an encomium, though one would elaborate on only the most important points (cf. Mt 1:18–25; Hermogenes Issues 46.14–17);13 after praising a king’s country and family, a rhetorician would turn to praising history (Menander Rhetor 2.1–2, 371–3);14
- Praising the virtue of Joseph and Mary fits ancient rhetorical emphasis on praiseworthy ancestry (see e.g. Gorgias Hel. 3); ‘upbringing’ was a conventional element in praising a person’s background (e.g. Menander Rhetor 2.1–2, 371.17–23, for the emperor’s instruction and training in encomia, see further Mack and Neyrey 1996:27–28);15
- Matthew 2:11–12 is comparable to rhetorical synkrisis, or comparison, of the new characters; although evident even in many Old Testament (OT) narratives, rhetoricians made deliberate and considered use of this technique.16
- As Matthew 6:1 offers a thesis illustrated by three examples (6:2–18), ancient rhetoricians often liked having three examples to support a rhetorical thesis (Quintilian Inst. 4.3.5; Pliny Ep. 2.20; cf. Cicero Pro Munera 5.11.45; though skilled rhetoricians complained about those who always managed to fit everything into three points; Cicero Quint. 10.35).
- The threefold repetition of σοῦ, ‘your’, at the end of successive clauses in Matthew 6:9–10 fits rhetorical antistrophe or epiphora (on which see e.g. Anderson 1999:163; Rowe 1997:131).
- Witty repartee was a valued skill17 and (as in the Gospels) could incur the enmity of the interlocutors at whose expense the wit succeeded (e.g. Philostratus Hkr. 33.8–9).
- In Matthew 12:43–45, Jesus essentially returns with interest his opponents’ demonstration of lack. Returning charges was conventional in forensic rhetoric,18
- Vice lists (Mt 15:19) are common among rhetoricians,19 though also in Jewish sources,20 among Stoics21 and other philosophers.22
- Rhetoricians could appreciate as rhetorical antithesis23 the contrast between the one exalting him- or herself being humbled and the one humbling him- or herself being exalted (Mt 23:12),24 though the basic idea appears in Jewish sources before significant influence from Graeco-Roman rhetorical forms.
- ‘Never before’ (Mt 24:21) was suitable evocative hyperbole, sometimes found in historians and speeches.25

Nevertheless, the heavy dominance of traditional materials in Matthew means that many of the forms we find there, such as story parables and Jesus’ sayings as a sage, do not fit ordinary Graeco-Roman rhetoric. Certain forms found in Graeco-Roman rhetoric can offer a context for the sorts of forms in which traditions were passed on (see Mack & Robbins 1989), including, for example, the ways that narrators felt free to elaborate, expand and condense their materials.26 My point, however, is that Jesus’

7. For example Suetonius Aug. 9; Calig. 22.1; Nero 19.3; Giogianmarro 2003; compare, for example, the accidental repetition in Plutarch Alex. 37.4, 56.1. This contrasts with the more chronologically practiced usage in historiography (e.g. Thucydides 2.11.5; 5.2.16; when interested in chronology, Suetonius cites no biographers but historians (Calig. 8.3). 8. Cornelius Nepos 16 (Pelopidas, 1.1); Tacitus Agr. 1 (on Tacitus cf. Moore 1937:xvi); Bamberg 1992:68–69, 100; compare Dıhne 1991:367–374. Still, good biographers were not supposed to risk falsifying events by flattery (Lucian Hist. 12). For emphasis on natural classics in ancient historiography more generally, see, for example, Polybius 1.1.1; Dionysius of Halicarnassus Ant. rom. 1.21.1; Valerius Maximus 2.1.4; Lucian Hist. 59; Fornara 1983:113–116; Margaret 1999:28–29. For moralising asides, see, for example, Herodotus 1.3.18; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 31.10.2; Dionysius of Halicarnassus Ant. rom. 7.65.2; Tacitus Ann. 4.33; Dio Cassius 1.5.4; Arrian Alex. 4.10.8; Cornelius Nepos 16 (Pelopidas, 3.1); see further in Sheely 1992:56–93.
9. For example, Xenophon Anab. 5.2.24; Dionysius of Halicarnassus Ant. rom. 8.5.6; compare Meister 2005:269; especially Squires 1993:15–20, 1998.38, citing Dionysius Halicarn. 1.1.3. 10. Not only novels (e.g. Helioudoros Eth. 1.1 (opening in the middle of a scene the background of which does not appear until 5.28–33. 2.11, 2.25–4.21), but also other genres (e.g. Polybus BK 3; c.f. Cicero Ver. 2.5.10–11.10).
11. One starts with pedigree both for people and animals (Rhetorica ad Alexandram 35, 1440b.24–29). One’s background was an important element in biography; see, for example, Suetonius Aug. 1.2–2.5; Feldman 2002. Some Jewish traditions may have differed by region (cf. Kahlm 1996).
14. Parentage could also be used to derive one (e.g. Ps.-Cicero Invective Against Sallust 5.13).
JEWISH SAGE RHETORIC

Examining Matthew’s Jewish context is hardly new, but, in view of the current interest in rhetorical studies, placing the teachings of Matthew’s Jesus in the context of the teachings of Jewish sages’ rhetoric is a topic that might yield interesting fruit. Unfortunately, we lack Jewish rhetorical handbooks comparable to Greek and Roman ones, one is hard-pressed to locate even collections of Jewish speeches per se.

We do, however, have many collections of Palestinian Jewish teachings, from Proverbs, to Sirach, to the later rabbis. Scholars wishing to compile extensive observations about Jewish sages’ rhetorical techniques (at least some of which will be comparable to Greek and Roman analogues) may thus start there, providing a service to those who wish to use such observations. Even the most refined and developed form of Jacob Neusner’s rhetoric, both in Scripture and subsequently.

I wish here merely to list several examples to suggest ways that the examination of Jewish rhetoric may be helpful:

- Although beatitudes (e.g. Mt 5:3-12) appear elsewhere in the Mediterranean world,32 they were more common in Jewish rhetoric, both in Scripture33 and subsequently.34

- Jewish teachers regularly distinguished ‘light’ and ‘heavy’ commandments (Mt 23:23, cf. Mt 5:19; e.g. Sipra VDeho. par. 3:14.3; 12.65.1; Dalman 1929:45; Flusser 1999:448).

- Early Jewish rhetoric often includes phrases similar to ‘You have heard it said’, often ‘what was said or as it is said’ (cf. Mt 5:21; 27, 31, 33, 38, 42).

- Lust hyperbolically constituting adultery (Mt 5:28).

- The phrase that it would be ‘measured’ to one as one measured to others (Mt 7:2; Lk 6:38).

- Comparing the one who judged mercifully by another (‘with the scale weighted in my favor’) prayed about 50 times in the New Testament (NT) and 40 times in the Apostolic Fathers (Matthew comprises roughly a quarter of NT uses).

- The phrase ‘To what shall I/we compare?’ (Mt 11:16; Lk 7:31) was common in Jewish rhetoric, especially to introduce parables.35

- The phrase ‘So-and-so is like’ (Mt 11:16, 13:24, 25:1; cf. also Mk 4:26,31, 33-34, Lk 6:48–49) is common in Jewish rhetoric.36


- More generally, Proverbs and Riddles continued among sages of Jesus’ day (cf. Gottfried 1993:151–154), although these are not uniquely Jewish or Eastern (cf. e.g. classical uses, Gärtnert 2008).

- Jewish teachers typically employed the rhetorical techniques of hyperbole and rhetorical overstatement (e.g. m. Ab. 2:8; Abot Nat. 36 A), though again these were by no means limited to them.37

- Matthew’s periphrastic ‘kingdom of heaven’ appears in some other early Jewish sources.38

- The first half of the Lord’s Prayer closely echoes the Kaddish (as well as the language of other early Jewish prayers).39

(footnote 31 cont...) about 50 times in the New Testament (NT) and 40 times in the Apostolic Fathers (Matthew comprises roughly a quarter of NT uses).

32Compare, for example, 1QpHab 6.2; 12M 11.5–6; C 4.13, 19–20, 6.13, 7.8, 14.9, 9.7–9.10; 16.1, 11: cf. M 11.15–16, 11.23; 12.13: Mek. Pisha 1.70–71; Ab. N. Nat. 36 A: cf. ‘they do x, but Moses said y’ (CD 5.18).


34Many compare the Jewish maxim, ‘By the measure by which one metes it is measured to one’ (judgment in the present era in m. Sot 1:7; b. Sot 8b; Pesiq. Rab. 39:2; more fully, Bivin 1991; Dalman 1929:225; Davies and Allison 1988:670; Smith 1951:135). Perhaps only one stream of Jewish tradition applied it to the Day of Judgement as Jesus does (cf. Bonsirven 1964), but it is at least implied elsewhere: a person judged mercifully by another (‘with the scale weighted in my favor’) prayed that God would also judge the other mercifully at the Judgement (Ab. Nat. 5A).


36See too, b. Kid. 2:6; Sipra Shemoni Mekhiti haMidrash 99:2.2, Beqiu. p. 3.263,1.5, 8: Sipre Num. 84.1, 81.5, 81.9; 42.2; Sipre Deut. 3:11, 11.11, 26.3, 28.1, 28.4, 29, 36.4, 40.6, 41.8, 43.16, 41.15, 42.8, 43.1, 36.3, 306.1, 306.7, 309.5, 312.1, 313.1, 343.12, 343.2, 5: Paan. 2.1:11, 7, 15; Lev. Rab. 27:2; compare Jeremias 1972:150; John 777:531, Smith 1951:179, Veremies 1993:92.

37For many of Jesus’ sayings as proverbial, see, for example, Damschen 2006:81.

38Greek and Roman audiences were also comfortable with these figures of speech (cf. Rhodonis ad Alexander 11, 1430b: 16–19; rhetorics ad Herennius 4.33: 44; Cicero De Oratore 10.139; Quintilian 8.6.73–73: Aristotle Rhet. 3.11:5; Demetrius Style 1.24–127; 3.61; further Anderson 2000:122–124), though this rhetoric has been disseminated more commonly in the marketplace (cf. e.g. PGM 36.69, 134, 211–212, 320) than in deliberative speeches. For examples of hyperbole, see Dionysius of Halicarnassus Demosth. 18, with Jewsaeus 20; Philostratus V. A. 8, 7; Philostratus Hyp. 48, 11.

39For example see Sipra Qed. 9, p. 207.2:13, p. Kid. 12:24. This is commonly pointed out, both by scholars of Judaism (cf. Bonsirven 1964, 1967; Marmorstein 1968:53; 1971:111 and by NT scholars (e.g. Goppelt 1981:144).


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Later Babylonian Jewish teachers, not likely influenced by Jesus, could depict what was impossible or close to impossible as ‘an elephant passing through a needle’s eye’ (Abrahams 1924:208; Bailey 1980:166; Dalman 1929:230; Jeremians 1972:195; they cite, for example, b. Ber. 55b; B.M. 38b); in Palestine, where the largest animal was a camel (cf. b. Ket. 67a), this expression seems more logical.46

Current Pharisaic debates about purity with respect to the flesh and blood of the sacrificial animals (in all the Gospels) is a specifically Semitic expression.47

Jesus links the two ‘greatest’ commandments on the basis of the common opening expression ve’ikharta (‘You shall love’, with Dzieziger 1979; Fiebrich 1988:479); this linkage reflects a common Jewish interpretive technique.48

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Current Pharisaic debates about purity with respect to the inside or outside of cups.48

One could go on at much greater length, but these examples should illustrate the particularly Jewish setting of Matthew’s tradition and sometimes his redaction. After centuries of Hellenisation, even Palestinian Jewish works could reflect Greek influence; purely Gentile Greek sources, however, do not reflect such Jewish motifs. Those attending to Matthew’s rhetoric, therefore, must look beyond Graeco-Roman rhetorical handbooks to the rhetoric of Jewish sages. This rhetoric is not available in ancient handbooks, and interpreters must compile such works or immerse themselves in ancient Jewish sources.

CONCLUSION

Because the Gospel writers addressed audiences in the Graeco-Roman world with various degrees of familiarity with standard rhetoric, rhetoric provides a helpful check on modern speculations about ancient speech and argument. Nevertheless, the form of rhetoric we find in Graeco-Roman handbooks, while worth exploring, will probably yield more limited benefits to Matthean studies than it has in Pauline or Lukan studies. One is likely influenced by Jesus, could depict what was impossible or close to impossible as ‘an elephant passing through a needle’s eye’ (Abrahams 1924:208; Bailey 1980:166; Dalman 1929:230; Jeremians 1972:195; they cite, for example, b. Ber. 55b; B.M. 38b); in Palestine, where the largest animal was a camel (cf. b. Ket. 67a), this expression seems more logical.46

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