SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY OF RHETORIC AND MATTHEW’S GOSPEL

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.

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 xxv–l).

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.1 (If I should go without saying that ancient biography is not identical to modern biography, although the latter ultimately developed from the former.)2 We have numerous examples of surviving biographies from within a few decades after the Gospels,3 as well as some others4 much earlier.

Examining the literary techniques of rhetorically trained writers of histories and biographies could, therefore, provide useful insights into Matthew’s own writing style5 and I sought to provide numerous such comparisons in my commentary on Matthew.6 Most ancient biographies, such as Matthew, tended

2. Talbott (1977:2–3) observes that Strauss, Bulmann (see 1968:372, 2005:547) and their followers rejected the biographical category because they confused ancient with modern biography.
3. Such as those of Plutarch, Tacitus and Suetonius, and Josephus’s autobiography. Plutarch and Suetonius are normally cited as the most obvious examples from this era (Kennedy 1978:139).
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 Rothschild 2004; for exploratory approaches to Graeco-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 Theron, 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 1992:110–11). Theological perspectives, too, drove 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 1:2–16; Rhetorica ad Alexandrum 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; Eunapius Livre 498; 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 his birth (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; cf. Emiliani, ‘Empire and training in encomia, see further Macrobius and Neyes 1996:27–28’).15
- Matthew 2:1–12 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. 4.5.3; Pliny Ep. 2.203; cf. Cicero Pro Murena 5.11 16; though skilled rhetoricians complained about those who always managed to fit everything into three points; Cicero Quint. 10.35).
- The threefold repetition of sou, your, at the end of successive clauses in Matthew 6:9–10 fits rhetorical antith trope or epiphora (on which see e.g. Anderson 1999:163; Rowe 1997:131).
- Witty repartee was a valued skill17 and as in the Gospel could incur the enmity of the interlocutors at whose expense the wit succeed (e.g. Philostratus Hkr. 33.8–9).
- In Matthew 12:43–45, Jesus essentially returns with interest has opponents’ ‘demotions’ ‘contradictions’. 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.
- Rhetoricians could appreciate as rhetorical antithesis22 the contrast between the one exalting him- or herself being humbled and the one humbling him or herself being exalted (Mt 23:12),23 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.24

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. Certainly 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.25 My point, however, is that Jesus’

16. Some also detect a common triple pattern in oral traditions (Dunn 2005:115).
17. For short narratives climaxing in the protagonist’s inclusive quip, see, for example, Plutarch A.eg. 21.4–5.
18. See, for example, Rhetorica ad Alexandrum 36, 1442b.6–9; Cic. Or. Cruc. 40.137; De or. 3.204 (also metathesis in Anderson, Glossary, 72–73); for examples, Thucydides 3.611, 3.703.4; Xenophon Hel. 2.33.7; Lysias Or. 3.1, 356; Aeschines Fals. Arg. 3. Or. 113, 156, 259; Dionysius of Halicarnassus Lys. 24; Cicero Sest. 37.80; Caes. 33.13, 24.60; Quint. 3.11–9.3; further discussion in Keener 2003:752–753; 2008:244–246.
19. See, for example, Rhetorica ad Alexandrum 36, 1442a.13–14; Cic. Pls. 27.66; Cat. 2.47.10; 2.50.10; 2.102.10; 2.122.9; Philostratus Vit. Apoll. 2.3.4, 6 (negated); Ps.-Cicero invect. Sall. 1.6; Dio Chrysostom Or. 1.13, 3.53, 4.26, 8.8, 25.38, 33.33.55, 34.19; Frontos Nep. Am. 2.8; Lucian Posts 4; Charon 11, 15, 107; Migr. 17; Maxims of Tyre 7.6; 36.2.
20. See, for example, Jeremiah 7:9; Ezekiel 18.6–8; 11–13; Hosea 4.2, 4Q437 ff. 7; col. 2, line 4; Wis 14.22–27 (esp. 14.25–26); Philo Paternosty 52. Compare also eschatological vice lists (2QS 4.9–11; Sir. 2.256–262; Test. Levi 17:11; 2 Timothy 3:1–5; for Gentile equivalents, Hesed W.2.181–281; Lucian Men. 11–12).
21. See, for example, Seneca Dial. 9.2.10–12; Epist. Diarii 2.8.22; Atius Dimidius Epit. 2.7.5b, pp. 13.2–13.2, 2.7.10b, pp. 58.39–60.31–62.11, 2.7.10b, pp. 60.6–61.1, 2.7.10e, pp. 62.13–14; 19, 2.7.11e, pp. 68.9–67.19; Diogenes Laerterius 2.93.
22. See, for example, Plato Lax. 1.649a; Aristotle E. E. 2.3, 1220b–1221a; Ps.-Aristotle V. V. 1249a–1251b; Diogenes Ep. 36; Philostratus Ep. 43; Iamblichus Vit. Pyth. 17.78.
23. See Rhetorica ad Alexandrum 26, 1435b.25–39; Cosby 1991:216–217 (citing Aristotle Raf. 3.9.7–8; Quintilian Inst. 9.3.81); MacDowell 1982:16–19; Rowe 1997:114. Note especially reasoning by contraries in Rhetorica ad Herennium 4.18.25.
24. Even the specific idea appears occasionally; see Xenophon Anab. 6.3.18; compare Seneca Ep. Lud. 94.73–74; Josephus Ant. 19.296.
25. See, for example, Psalms 15:27; Isaiah 21:1–12, 15, 5, 113; Ezekiel 21:36; Daniel 4:37; antithesis more generally characterizes much Jewish wisdom, for example, in Proverbs.
26. Compare Dionysius of Halicarnassus Thuc. 19; Thucydides 2.9.1; 8.96.1; Cicero Verr. 2.5.12; 189; Philostratus Hkr. 24.2; compare ‘never again’ in Silius Italicus 9.157; Rhodes on the ‘greatest’ war in Thucydides 1.11.2–1.12.1, 1.23.1–2.
27. See, for example, Theon Progymn. 3.224–40, 4.37–42, 80–82; compare Longinus. On the Sublime 11.11; Hermogenes Progymn. 3. On Chresta, 7; Aphthonius Progymn. 3. On Chresta, 235, 4R.
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 here, providing a service to those who wish to use such observations. Even the earliest rabbinic literature is, of course, later than our period (just as Sirach is earlier), but where scholars may observe matters of continuity between Sirach and later rabbis, or even between Jesus (who did not significantly influence later rabbinic rhetoric) and the rabbis, we may infer some patterns of discourse that remained. Scholars are in an increasingly better position to identify the antiquity of some rabbinic traditions today through the continuing work of David Instone-Brewer, who is applying continuity with earlier sources is an important one.

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

**List of examples:**

- **Additional beatiudes** (Mt 5:3–12) appear elsewhere in the Mediterranean world, they were more common in Jewish rhetoric, both in Scripture and subsequently.

- **Jewish teachers regularly distinguished ‘light’ and ‘heavy’ commandments (Mt 23:23; cf. Mt 5:19; e.g. Sipra VDDeho. par. 1.34.1.3; 12.61.5; 12.63.1; cf. Damman 1929:64; Flusser 1988:400).**

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

- **Removing the beam from one’s eye before trying to remove the chip from another’s (Mt 7:3–5; Lk 6:41–42); this might be a figure of speech, attested in b. Arakin 16b; b. B.B. 15b (Vermes 1993:80), other texts in Lachs 1987:137, if that is not a polemical distortion of Jewish ‘teaching.’**

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

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


- **More generally, proverbs and riddles continued among sages of Jesus’ day (cf. Gottlieb 1993:15–16).**

- **The first half of the Lord’s Prayer closely echoes the Kaddish.**

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• ‘Mysteries of the kingdom’ (Mt 13:11) may echo language from Daniel 2:44–47.\(^b\)
• The Pharisees’ divorce question reflects a debate among Pharisaic schools from Jesus’ day (even more clearly in Matthew than in Mark).\(^b\)
• ‘Son of Man’ (in all the Gospels) is a specifically Semitic expression.\(^b\)
• ‘Moving mountains’ may have been a Jewish metaphor for the form of rhetoric we find in Graeco-Roman handbooks, while speculations about ancient speech and argument. Nevertheless, standard rhetoric provides a helpful check on modern guesses about Jesus the Galilean sage, examining Jewish sage rhetoric will prove particularly helpful for understanding his work.

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 the form of rhetoric we find in Graeco-Roman handbooks, while speculations about ancient speech and argument. Nevertheless, standard rhetoric provides a helpful check on modern guesses about Jesus the Galilean sage, examining Jewish sage rhetoric will prove particularly helpful for understanding his work.

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Foorote 41 cont...)


43. Withfor example Jeremias 1971:260–262, regardless of the other debates surrounding its meaning.


45. Later rabbis often discussed the question of the ‘greatest’ commandment; see, for example, Hagner 1993–1995:646; R. Akiba valued love of neighbour as the greatest (Sippa Qod. pp. 420:3, 3, Gen. Rab. 24:7).

46. Gezerah sheva (perhaps borrowed from Hellenism, but notably common in Jewish interpretation; e.g. Mekilta Nitz. 10.15–16, 26.3–8, 17, Pisha 5:103, cf. Gill 7.15–20; Keener 2003:305, 1184, for further sources).

47. The expression persists as late as Qur’an 7.40, though this reference (involving eternal life) might evoke the tradition of Jesus’ usage.


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