

DISSERTATION SUMMARY

Jesus's Use of Hyperbole in the Gospel of Matthew¹

Stefanus Kristianto

New Testament lecturer

Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Injili Abdi Allah, Indonesia

stefanuskristianto31@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0206-0440>

This dissertation investigates Jesus's use of hyperbole in the First Gospel. Although many scholars have recognised that hyperbole is an essential feature of Jesus's teaching, no recent comprehensive study has examined this topic in detail. Earlier studies of Jesus's hyperbole (e.g. C. Douglas; R. H. Stein) are now outdated and require some reassessments. Modern linguistic research has offered important insights into the topic of Jesus's use of hyperbole (e.g. C. Cruise, S. Llewelyn, and W. Robinson). However, these attempts remain sporadic and have not resulted in a comprehensive analysis.

In response to this gap, this thesis offers a comprehensive study of Jesus's use of hyperbole informed by insights from modern linguistic studies. The First Gospel is chosen as the primary focus because it contains numerous examples of Jesus's hyperbolic language. Examination of various commentaries indicates that Matthew presents at least forty-seven potential instances of Jesus's hyperbolic remarks, seventeen of which (approximately thirty-six percent) are unique to that Gospel (cf. Mark: fifteen potential instances; Luke: twenty-four potential instances). While different scholars may arrive at somewhat different calculations, Matthew clearly contains the largest concentration of such material.

1. Stefanus Kristianto, 'Jesus's Use of Hyperbole in the Gospel of Matthew' (PhD Thesis, London School of Theology/Middlesex University, 2025). Supervisors: Prof. Cornelis Bennema and Revd Dr Tim L. Carter. This thesis has been accepted for publication in the Langham Monographs series.

Broadly speaking, the thesis addresses three main questions. The first concerns the nature of hyperbole and how it may be detected and interpreted. This issue is discussed in Chapter 2. The chapter argues that hyperbole contains five essential elements: scalar nature, counter-factuality, intentionality, subjectivity, and context. On this basis, hyperbole may be defined as a counterfactual statement or idea with a scalar nature that is intentionally employed to convey both cognitive and implicational aspects from the speaker to the audience.

From this definition, a straightforward method for detecting hyperbole is proposed:

1. determining whether a statement or idea is counterfactual;
2. investigating whether that counterfactual statement or idea possesses a scalar nature;
3. considering whether the text records the audience's response (although this evidence is relatively rare in biblical texts).

To understand hyperbole, we must first downgrade the idea or statement to find its cognitive aspect. At the same time, hyperbole often communicates the speaker's attitudinal aspect. For this reason, interpreters must also identify what Peña-Cervel and de Mendoza Ibáñez describe as the 'central meaning implication', namely the implicational aspect conveyed by the hyperbolic expression.

The second question examines how ancient literature contributes to our understanding of hyperbole. Chapters 3 and 4 address this issue. Chapter 3 surveys several works by ten Greek authors and selected works by four Roman writers. Several observations emerge from this analysis.

First, the methodology proposed in this thesis does not impose a modern concept of hyperbole upon ancient texts but rather organises insights already perceived by ancient authors themselves, whether in part or entirely. For instance, Quintilian's discussion of hyperbole suggests that counter-factuality and scalar nature are inseparable elements of hyperbole. Likewise, the writings of Demosthenes and Strabo illustrate the twofold functions of hyperbole discussed earlier. In this respect, the proposed methodology cannot be considered anachronistic.

Second, Graeco-Roman texts provide examples of hyperbole that can be classified into nine primary categories: (i) basic or independent hyperbole, (ii) hyperbolic simile, (iii) comparative hyperbole, (iv) hyperbolic metaphor, (v) hyperbolic analogy, (vi) numerical hyperbole, (vii) superlative hyperbole, (viii) strong word, and (ix) universal language. This classification provides a useful framework for analysing the forms of hyperbole used by Jesus.

Third, Graeco-Roman texts generally approach hyperbole with caution. They often regard it negatively or at least warn against its excessive use.

Chapter 4 investigates how ancient Jewish literature contributes to the understanding of hyperbole, focusing primarily on the Old Testament. In contrast to Graeco-Roman literature, Jewish texts employ hyperbole far more frequently. This observation has already been noted by earlier scholars (cf. Douglas; Eybers). Moreover, the Old Testament displays richer forms and functions of hyperbole than those discussed in Graeco-Roman texts.

In terms of form, the Old Testament includes examples of extreme illustration and mixed forms of hyperbole. Regarding cognitive function, Old Testament hyperbole serves at least four purposes: heightening quality, heightening quantity, depicting a situation, and emphasising emotions. In terms of implicational function, Old Testament hyperbole may serve various purposes, including praise, mockery, warning, and humour.

The chapter also considers hyperbole in Second Temple literature, although the discussion is limited. The aim is simply to demonstrate that hyperbole also appears in this body of literature and is used in ways broadly similar to those found in the Old Testament. At the same time, each corpus exhibits distinctive tendencies. For instance, Josephus frequently employs numerical hyperbole, whereas the language of the Qumran texts tends to be comparatively straightforward.

Given the prominence of hyperbole within Jewish literature, it is reasonable to expect that Jesus also employs hyperbolic language. Chapter 5 addresses the third question by identifying statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew that may be classified as hyperbole and by examining the patterns that emerge. After analysing thirty-two passages, several observations may be made.

First, the Matthean Jesus frequently employs hyperbole. It appears not only in everyday conversations but particularly within his extended discourses (e.g. Matt 5:18; 5:22; 5:28; 6:3; 7:3; 13:32; 18:24; 24:21). Hyperbole may, therefore, be regarded as an important feature of Jesus's discourses in Matthew.

Second, the Matthean Jesus demonstrates creativity in his use of hyperbole. In some instances, his hyperbolic language reflects conventional patterns, while in other cases, he produces new, powerful, and often humorous expressions (e.g. Matt 5:22; 5:23-24; 5:39-42; 13:44-46).

Third, the Matthean Jesus employs extreme illustrations more frequently than other forms of hyperbole. He often constructs illustrations or short narratives containing extreme or hyperbolic elements (5:23-24; 5:29-30; 5:39-42; 7:6; 13:44-46; 17:20; 21:21; 23:15). Although this form is not especially

prominent in the Old Testament or Second Temple literature, it becomes particularly notable in Jesus's teaching.

Fourth, the Matthean Jesus employs hyperbole for several dominant implicatures: (i) prompting the audience to pursue what is good or to avoid what is wrong; (ii) warning the audience about some difficult or impending situations; (iii) criticising sin or moral failure; and (iv) eliciting humour. In the last respect, hyperbole functions as an important rhetorical device in the Matthean Jesus's use of humour.

Finally, the patterns observed in Jesus's use of hyperbole contribute to Matthew's portrayal of Jesus. On the one hand, as previously explained, the Matthean Jesus frequently uses hyperbole to exhort his audience to pursue what is good, avoid evil, and reflect on God. This usage resembles the patterns found in Jewish wisdom literature, such as Psalms, Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Sirach (e.g. Prov 4:5; 7:9-10; 10:21; Wis 2:14; 5:9; Sir 6:36; 19:11-12). On the other hand, the Matthean Jesus also uses hyperbole to warn his audience of coming judgement and to expose their sin. In this respect, his rhetoric resembles that of the Old Testament prophets' use of hyperbole (e.g. Isa 28:8; Jer 3:2; 5:1; Ezek 20:47; Hos 4:1-2; Mic 3:2-3; Nah 3:12; Zeph 1:2-3). These patterns, therefore, support the well-established conclusion that the Gospel of Matthew portrays Jesus as both a wisdom teacher and a prophet. The present study contributes further evidence for this portrayal through a detailed analysis of the rhetorical function of hyperbole in Jesus's teaching.