

A METHODOLOGY FOR DETECTING AND MITIGATING HYPERBOLE IN MATTHEW 5:38–42

CHARLES CRUISE*

Abstract: *Matthean scholars have struggled to interpret a positive benefit for the radical commandment of Jesus against resistance and/or retaliation in the face of evil in Matt 5:38–42. The thesis of this article is that Jesus’s true intention can be discovered only when it is realized that he was speaking hyperbolically. Although others have claimed as much, no one has yet applied a comprehensive methodology for detecting and interpreting (mitigating) the hyperbole in this passage. The present study aims to do just that. Drawing from insights from the ancient rhetorical handbooks and modern linguistic studies of hyperbole, a reading of Matt 5:38–42 is proposed based on logical, linguistic, and rhetorical features of the text. In the end, it may be seen that turning the other cheek can be conceptualized in terms of a continuum within an economy of giving and taking. Rather than giving extra to an enemy (the hyperbolic response), the mitigated (though still radical) response is to forgive the enemy’s “theft” of honor, clothing, or freedom and not to repay in kind. Jesus’s teaching of forgiveness toward enemies may therefore operate as a hedge against the abuses of the OT principle of lex talionis.*

Key words: *Sermon on the Mount, hyperbole, rhetoric, non-retaliation, lex talionis*

Matthew 5:38–42 is regarded as one of the hard sayings of Jesus.¹ Interpreters must not only reckon with the teaching on non-resistance/non-retaliation in the face of evil, based on the infinitive (μη ἀντιστῆναι) used with negative imperatival force, they must also confront the positive imperatives that follow: στρέψον ... ἄφες ... ὑπαγε ... δός.² In other words, in 5:38–42 Jesus is not just exhorting the disciples to suffer injustice; he is instructing them to *intentionally extend their victimhood*: “Vss. 39b–41 do not merely speak of non-resistance. They do more than insist that one should not resist a slap on the cheek, the taking of one’s tunic, or forced labor. In each case an *action* is commanded, and this action is the precise opposite of our natural tendency in the situation.”³ Meanwhile, “any hint that could explain these demands as prudent and reasonable is missing.”⁴

* Charles Cruise received his Ph.D. in NT from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and is an adjunct professor there. He can be reached at chuck.e.cruise@gmail.com.

¹ The passage is paralleled, in part, in Luke 6:29–30.

² There is much debate about the meaning of the imperative in this context. It may suggest complete nonresistance, nonresistance in a legal context, or nonretaliation. I will take up this issue in the conclusion.

³ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Sword of His Mouth* (SemeiaSup 1; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 70.

⁴ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 307.

Interpreters who opt for a literal interpretation typically do not engage with the full force of these positive statements.⁵ Or, in some cases “turn the other cheek” is said to be exemplified by Jesus’s own sufferings (Matt 26:67–68; 27:30; 1 Pet 2:23), echoing Isa 50:6: “I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.”⁶ What the passion narrative demonstrates, however, is that Jesus suffered abuse, not that he intentionally solicited further abuse by his behavior, as Matt 5:39b would literally require.⁷ Therefore, appealing to Jesus as a model does not adequately deal with the positive statements.

A few interpreters seek a “greater good” inherent, though unexpressed, in the prescriptions of 5:39b–42. Donald Hagner, for instance, proposes that by acting in such a surprising way toward their abusers, Jesus’s disciples model the gospel’s grace to them.⁸ Or perhaps, as Gordon Zerbe suggests, such actions cause abusers to reflect on their behavior and, consequently, to consider changing it.⁹ Victims could conceivably benefit as well. By turning the other cheek, giving one’s cloak, or going the extra mile, a victim refuses self-pity and may gain a sense of dignity and control:

Why, then, does Jesus counsel these already humiliated people to turn the other cheek? Because this action robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate. The person who turns the other cheek is saying, in effect, “Try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your status (gender, race, age, wealth) does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me.”¹⁰

⁵ E.g. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (WBC 33A; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 132, “The true disciple does more than is expected”; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 218, interprets the positive commands as “an essentially non-self-centered approach to ethics which puts the interests of the other before personal rights or convenience.”

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 209; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 131; Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 285; D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 189; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 201.

⁷ The same may be said for Acts 23:2–3, which Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 285, sees as a further example of the principle laid out in Matt 5:39b. Here, however, Paul does not offer his other cheek to be struck. On the contrary, he insults the high priest.

⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 132. Cf. Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 285, that Matt 5:38–42 represents examples of Christians being salt and light.

⁹ Gordon Zerbe, *Non-Retaliation in Early Jewish and New Testament Texts: Ethical Themes in Social Contexts* (JSPSup 13; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 185; cf. Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 290, “The gesture exposes the act of the offender as what it is: morally repulsive and improper. In addition, it doubles the renunciation of violence by the person insulted; and finally, it challenges the striker to react with comparable generosity.”

¹⁰ Walter Wink, “Neither Passivity Nor Violence: Jesus’ Third Way (Matt. 5:38–42 Par.),” in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament* (ed. Williard M. Swartley; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 105; Zerbe, *Non-Retaliation*, 185, “The exhortation ultimately implies the refusal to be subjugated to an oppressor, since the action is determined by the victim. The oppressed serve only their

Let us briefly consider the viability of the “greater good” interpretation. While the potential for a beneficial effect on the abuser must be considered, it is far from certain that the abuser would be positively impacted. Admittedly, continuing to engage an abuser in the ways that Jesus outlines might not only be futile but might even be perceived as provocative, placing the victim in even greater peril. As for the victim, it is difficult to envision Jesus teaching non-resistance to evil as an avenue toward self-enhancement or as a way to simply make the best of a bad situation. Where else does Jesus recommend actions to increase the dignity and control of his disciples? On the contrary, he calls them to lose control and to risk humiliation for his sake (e.g. Matt 10:25; 16:24–25).

A more viable option is to view the passage figuratively, that is, as an instance of hyperbole. Several interpreters regard verse 40 to be hyperbolic, as freely giving up one’s cloak (ἱμάτιον) in addition to the undergarment (χιτῶνά) would render a person naked.¹¹ Some also acknowledge the impracticability of unlimited giving to beggars.¹² W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, however, characterize the entire passage as hyperbolic: “The import of the following sentences [vv. 40–42] is lost if one attempts to take them literally. Jesus often resorted to extreme exaggeration in order to drive home his points and to get his hearers to ask questions and see their world from a new perspective.”¹³

Of the commentators who view at least parts of Matt 5:38–42 as hyperbolic, there is little discussion as to what criteria might render a verse hyperbolic or how to mitigate the meaning (i.e. reduce to its non-hyperbolic sense).¹⁴ There merely seems to be a shared sense that certain aspects of Jesus’s teaching, in some regard, surpass the sensibilities of the audience or contradict other Scriptures. But how are scholars to go from recognition of hyperbole to interpretation? And, how are readers to adjudicate their claims?

The purpose of this study is to construct a methodology by which hyperbole in Matt 5:38–42 may be detected and interpreted. The nature and rhetorical function of hyperbole will first be examined, and then criteria will be compiled against which Jesus’s prescriptions may be tested. The thesis is that, once these criteria are carefully applied, Matt 5:38–42 will be shown to be hyperbolic in each of its four positive prescriptions. Furthermore, once the mitigation process is implemented, it

true master”; in the view of Keener, *Matthew*, 197–98, the victim who offers the other cheek surrenders human honor and gains honor before God.

¹¹ Keener, *Matthew*, 195, remarks that nudity was an “intolerable dishonor in Palestinian society” and appeals to Gen 3:7, 10–11; 9:22; *Jub.* 3:21–22, 30–31; 7:8–10, 20; 1QS 7:12; Sifre Deut. 320.5.2; Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 272; cf. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1–7* (ICC; New York: T&T Clark, 1988), 545; Carson, *Matthew*, 190. Also, the OT prohibited taking a poor person’s cloak since, as the outer garment, it served as a bed for the night (Exod 22:25–27; Deut 24:12–13).

¹² Carson, *Matthew*, 190; Keener, *Matthew*, labels verse 42 as “rhetorical overstatement.”

¹³ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 541; cf. William Neil, *The Difficult Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 4, who takes the entire passage figuratively but does not mention hyperbole per se.

¹⁴ Tannehill, *Sword of His Mouth*, 67, “We feel uneasy about interpreting the command to turn the other cheek literally. However, few interpreters attempt to explain why this is not literal language. Nor do they give a clear account of the nature and qualities of this language, if it is not literal.”

will lead us to firmer conclusions regarding interpretation than what have been previously possible.

I. DEFINING HYPERBOLE

Hyperbole is a deliberate exaggeration for the sake of effect. The word is derived from the Greek ὑπερβολή (verb form ὑπερβάλλω, originally meaning “to cast beyond,” as in a spear contest [BDAG]). In the technical literature, “hyperbole” is preferred over the more colloquial “exaggeration” or “overstatement,” though they all mean roughly the same thing.¹⁵

1. *Ancient conceptualizations.* Hyperbole has been recognized in human communication for thousands of years. It was discussed as early as Aristotle (384–322 BC), the author of the rhetorical handbook *On Rhetoric*. Aristotle mentions hyperbole in the course of discussing metaphor and other devices of style. He includes a few examples along with a comment on what types of people normally use hyperbole: “There is something youthful about hyperboles; for they show vehemence. Wherefore those who are in a passion (ὀργιζόμενοι) most frequently make use of them.”¹⁶

A few centuries later, in *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (written c. 85 BC and now considered to be anonymous), the author defines hyperbole as “a manner of speech exaggerating the truth, whether for the sake of magnifying or minifying something.”¹⁷ This definition shows that even in the first century BC, hyperbole was recognized in the Roman world as a rhetorical strategy which could be employed in the service of amplifying or attenuating an utterance.

Nearly contemporaneous with *Ad Herennium* is Cicero’s *On the Orator* (*De Oratore*), in which he describes hyperbole as “intentional understatements or overstatements [*minuendi aut augendi*] which are exaggerated to a degree of the astonishing that passes belief.”¹⁸ Being a master of invective, Cicero gives examples that are meant to evoke laughter from the audience at the expense of others, such as Memmius’s thinking so highly of himself that “he lowered his head to pass under the Arch of Fabius.”¹⁹

More extensive than the above treatments is Quintilian’s *The Orator’s Education* (*Institutio Oratoria*), composed in the latter half of the first century AD.²⁰ It is “the

¹⁵ Claudia Claridge, *Hyperbole in English: A Corpus-based Study of Exaggeration* (Studies in English Language; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6. Hyperbole may also involve understatement or litotes.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Rhet.*, 3.11.15 (trans. J. H. Freese; LCL 193; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 417.

¹⁷ *Rhet. Her.*, 4.33 (trans. Harry Caplan; LCL 403; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 339.

¹⁸ Cicero, *De or.*, 2.66.267 (trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham; LCL 348; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 400–401.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Two other ancient sources for hyperbole are Longinus, *On the Sublime* (trans. W. H. Fyfe; rev. Donald Russell; LCL 199; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 38, and Demetrius, *On Style* (trans. Doreen C. Innes; LCL 199; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 124–27. Two

fullest account of classical rhetoric, based on his twenty years of teaching the subject and over two years of research in earlier sources.”²¹ As with Cicero, Quintilian notes the dual role that hyperbole can play as a species of amplification or attenuation (8.4.29; 8.6.68; 9.1.29). The bulk of Quintilian’s material deals with amplification, which was the more common usage of the two. In addition to hyperbole, he describes four methods for producing amplification:

1. *Increment*—This involves gradually increasing the force of an argument in a step-by-step fashion (“It is wrong to bind a Roman citizen, a crime to flog him, little short of parricide to put him to death: what shall I say about putting him on the cross?”)²²
2. *Comparison*—“The object is not to show that [someone] did a bad thing, but that he did something worse than the other person.”²³
3. *Inference*—“One thing is often magnified by reference to another: as when ... we admire the courage of the Gauls and Germans in order to enhance Caesar’s glory.”²⁴
4. *Accumulation* (“of words and sentences having the same meaning”)—“The facts are raised by being piled up.”²⁵ In contrast to the “accumulation of different facts,” this involves “multiplication of a single one. This accumulation often shows a rising pattern, when every word marks a step in an ascending series: ‘There stood the doorkeeper of the prison, the praetor’s executioner, the death and terror of the allies and citizens of Rome, lictor Sextius.’”²⁶

Quintilian views hyperbole as a “bolder kind of Ornament” in speech but an “appropriate exaggeration of the truth” nonetheless.²⁷ Hyperbole is said to be a widely used figure of speech, practiced in the speech of the educated and the uneducated alike.²⁸ Quintilian, however, cautions against its misuse: “It is enough to remind the reader that Hyperbole is a liar, but does not lie to deceive.”²⁹ A discern-

modern handbooks deserve mention as they largely summarize the ancient data, particularly that of Quintilian. They are Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study* (ed. David E. Orton and R. Dan Anderson; trans. Matthew T. Bliss et al.; Boston: Brill, 1998), §579, and Josef Martin, *Antike Rhetorik: Technik und Methode* (Munich: C. H. Beck’sche, 1974), 264.

²¹ George Kennedy, “Historical Survey of Rhetoric,” in *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period 330 B.C.—A.D. 400* (ed. Stanley Porter; New York: Brill, 1997), 31.

²² Quintilian, *Inst.* 8.4.3 (trans. Donald A. Russell; LCL 126; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 393.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.4.12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.4.20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.4.26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.4.27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.6.67.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.6.75, “Everybody has a natural desire to exaggerate.”

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.6.74.

ing audience, then, might judge a speaker as foolish who tries to make them believe something that simply is not true.³⁰

Before moving on, it is necessary to address the issue of the relevance of the above material to Jesus's teachings. After all, it is not likely that Jesus's use of hyperbole was based upon its recommendation in the Greco-Roman handbooks. Rather, it was "characteristic of Semitic speech."³¹ In the virtual absence of discussion in the rabbinical texts concerning the use of hyperbole, however, the Greco-Roman sources give us the best glimpse into how hyperbole was conceived of and practiced in the ancient world.³²

2. *Modern conceptualizations.* Modern linguistics theory has also been helpful in expanding the knowledge base concerning hyperbole. In this section I draw largely from Claudia Claridge's *Hyperbole in English: A Corpus-based Study of Exaggeration*, as she has isolated several characteristics of hyperbole for discussion. The main characteristic she notes is nonveridicality, or untruthfulness. Essentially, hyperbole is the art of the truthful lie. For instance, in his lament over Saul and Jonathan, David says, "They were swifter than eagles; they were stronger than lions" (2 Sam 1:23 ESV). The audience understands this not to be literally true. In effect, the speaker who uses hyperbole creates "a kind of joint pretense in which speakers and addressees create a new layer of joint activity."³³ This activity occurs beyond the layer of what is actually being said.

Hyperbole as deception is not a violation of conversational protocol because both speaker and addressee are on board and engaged in the joint pretense. Another way to conceptualize this is through the work of philosopher Paul Grice, who in his 1967 William James Lectures specified four maxims by which human conversation typically takes place. Known collectively as the *cooperative principle*, the maxims are: (1) the quantity maxim (give as much information as necessary but no more); (2) the quality maxim (be truthful); (3) the maxim of relation (be relevant); and (4) the maxim of manner (be perspicuous).³⁴ By flouting (violating in a blatant/conspicuous way) one or more of these maxims, speakers communicate *implicatures*, assumptions which are implicitly suggested by the utterance minus the

³⁰ Though he includes cautionary advice, it would be wrong to say that Quintilian is negative toward hyperbole. On the contrary, he goes to great length to describe its forms and even includes it among the devices used by ideal orators: "Here is how our ideal orator will speak. . . . He will also pursue the other 'virtues' of oratory: brevity when required, often making the facts seem to be present to our eyes, often using hyperbole, often hinting at more than he says, often employing humour, and often imitating life and nature. In all this—you see what a mass of material he has—the greatness of his eloquence should shine through" (*Inst.* 9.1.45).

³¹ Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 8.

³² There is a Talmudic mention of hyperbole in *b. Tamid* 29a.

³³ Herbert H. Clark, *Using Language* (Macmillan English Series; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 143; see also Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter, "'There's Millions of Them': Hyperbole in Everyday Conversation," *Journal of Pragmatics* 36 (2004): 152.

³⁴ Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 26–28.

words themselves. Hyperbole involves mostly a flout of the quality maxim.³⁵ Therefore, when a speaker is untruthful, the addressee may ask, “Is this speaker blatantly violating the quality maxim? If so, what is being implied?” In the case of 2 Sam 1:23, readers would conclude that the implicatures were that Saul and Jonathan were athletic, mighty figures.

The second characteristic, intentionality, reflects the fact that hyperbole does not happen by accident. Rather, it is an “intentional linguistic act.”³⁶ The speaker purposefully “[transports] an attitude ... to the facts, without misrepresenting the facts themselves.”³⁷

The third characteristic is subjectivity, which is the content conveyed about the speaker. Hyperbole demonstrates something about the speaker’s perspective (also known as the speaker’s imprint) in discourse. “Subjectivity thus comprises the expression of various aspects, such as the colouring of the message by/through the speaker’s perspective or viewpoint, affect and attitude, epistemic modality and metalinguistic comments on the style of speaking.”³⁸ In the example above, David’s positive attitude and emotions toward Saul and Jonathan are conveyed through his outsized praising of their abilities.

The fourth characteristic, gradability, means that hyperbole can be conceived of in terms of points along a vertical scale.³⁹ “The notion of degree is basic to hyperbole” precisely because of two primary metaphors (those learned early in life through the sensorimotor system) which are engaged in hyperbole.⁴⁰ The first is *important is big*, and the other is *more is up*. Together, these two metaphors influence human communication, particularly hyperbole, and allow us to lend significance to things by the way we describe them. Take, for instance, the report of the spies returning from Israel who described the cities as “great and fortified up to heaven” (Deut 1:28 ESV). In this example, extreme height is used to evoke the imposing nature of the cities. Or, consider how David describes Saul and Jonathan in terms of a bird exceedingly fast on the scale of flight speed and an animal known for its massive size and strength (corresponding to the top two levels in Figure 1).⁴¹

³⁵ Claridge, *Hyperbole in English*, 131, 136, proposes that the maxims of relation and quantity are also involved in hyperbole.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁹ Cf. Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, §579, who defines hyperbole as “an extreme, literally implausible onomastic surpassing of the *verbum proprium*. It is a metaphor with vertical gradations and so (like the horizontal metaphor) has evocative, poetical effect, which is used in rhetoric in the interests of one’s party (*augere/minuere*).”

⁴⁰ Claridge, *Hyperbole in English*, 7.

⁴¹ The type of hyperbole used by David is actually composite, or metaphorical, hyperbole because it crosses semantic domains, from a purely quantitative register of speed/strength to an implicit taxonomy of animals, for each colon. In this way, according to Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, §579, “The intended vertical shift can be expressed and made concrete by means of a horizontal (thus metaphorical) shift.” As Claridge, *Hyperbole in English*, 42, notes, “The advantage of metaphorical hyperbole can be found in the fact that such examples can also have a greater effect on the audience, often because more

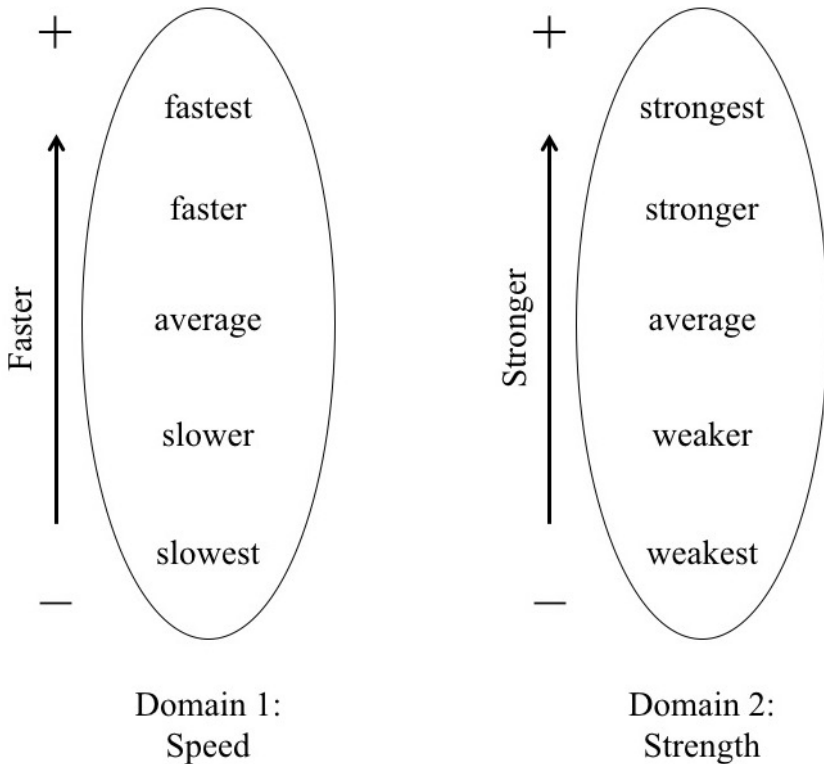


Figure 1: The Vertical Scalar Dimensions of Hyperbole Used in 2 Sam 1:23.

Because hyperbole is gradable, it can be mitigated, or scaled downward to an appropriate level of meaning. Mitigation typically reduces the intensity of an utterance to one point below the hyperbolic level.⁴² In other words, Saul and Jonathan were not the fastest and strongest humans on earth, but they were faster and stronger than average. Likewise, if I tell my wife that the meal she prepared was the best I have ever tasted, she will most likely realize that I am using speaking hyperbolically and mitigate it to the level of an “excellent dinner” (Figure 2).

than one semantic attribute plays a role, a fully rounded picture/concept is evoked and/or the surprise value is greater. Thus, the hyperbolic effect is achieved in a more striking way.”

⁴² Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1979), 68; Javier Herrero Ruiz, *Understanding Tropes: At the Crossroads between Pragmatics and Cognition* (Duisburg Papers on Research in Language and Culture 75; New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 216.



Figure 2: Example Mitigation of Hyperbole.

A fifth characteristic is extreme language.⁴³ Robert Tannehill describes extreme language as that which “stands in deliberate tension with a basic pattern of human behavior.”⁴⁴ Take, for instance, Jesus’s command to gouge out one’s eye or to cut off one’s hand. These are extreme examples because they shock the intellect, and few would argue that they are not also hyperbolic.

A final characteristic of hyperbole is the use of universal language, particularly adjective modifiers such as “all,” “none,” “every,” “whole,” and “any.”⁴⁵ In the linguistic literature they are called extreme case formulations (ECFs).⁴⁶ These modifiers are often used in the construction of hyperbolic statements. Some biblical examples are:

The *whole* city was gathered together at the door. (Mark 1:33)

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and *all* Jerusalem with him.
(Matt 2:3)

⁴³ Tannehill, *Sword of His Mouth*, 76, writes that hyperbole “make[s] use of extreme language in order to increase the impact upon the hearer.”

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Sayings in the Gospels: Jesus’ Use of Overstatement and Hyperbole* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 80–82.

⁴⁶ Anita Pomerantz, “Extreme Case Formulations: A Way of Legitimizing Claims,” *Human Studies* 9 (1986): 219–29; Neal R. Norrick, “Hyperbole, Extreme Case Formulation,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 36 (2004): 1727–39; Neal R. Norrick, “Hyperbole,” in *The Pragmatics Encyclopedia* (ed. Louise Cummings; New York: Routledge, 2010), 201.

Your faith is proclaimed in *all* the world. (Rom 1:8)⁴⁷

II. DETECTING HYPERBOLE

How might we apply the above insights toward a mechanism for detecting hyperbole in Matt 5:38–42? After all, there is great hermeneutical distance between the Sermon on the Mount and the canons of modern linguistic theory, or between the speaker Jesus and the Greco-Roman rhetoricians. We must proceed with caution to avoid anachronism.

Having said that, I believe we profit from allowing ancient and modern sources to inform our study of hyperbole for several reasons: (1) it is helpful to establish a commonly agreed upon terminological basis for discussing linguistic phenomena such as hyperbole; (2) ancient and modern insights are applied toward the study of other figurative language in the Bible such as simile, metaphor, irony, and personification;⁴⁸ (3) though there are no doubt cultural factors which determine the uses and forms of hyperbole, its use has been found to be cross-cultural and present at an early age in humans;⁴⁹ and (4) hyperbole as talked about today appears to correspond well with what we recognize to be hyperbole in the Bible.⁵⁰

1. *Methodology.* Proceeding with our inquiry into Matt 5:38–42, I propose a tripartite analysis of the text involving logical, linguistic, and rhetorical criteria. Following the detection of hyperbole in the text, we will turn our attention to mitigating it.

a. *Logical criteria.* The logical criteria are built around the concept of non-veridicality, or the flouting of Grice's quality maxim. Such a flout, as noted above, betrays intentionality. That is, it should be evident that the speaker and audience are engaged in a deliberate "joint pretense" constructed by the speaker and recognized by the hearers. What signs might betray such a joint pretense? Robert Stein suggests several logical signs of the "game" of hyperbole with regard to the teachings of Jesus:

1. The statement is literally impossible.

⁴⁷ Examples are from the ESV; emphasis added.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., the massive catalog of figurative language in E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (1898; repr. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2012).

⁴⁹ George A. Kennedy, *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 165, 188, discusses hyperbole as basic to both Chinese and Indian literary theory. According to K. McFadden, "Hyperbole," *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (ed. Roland Greene; 4th ed; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 648, "hyperbole is common across all literatures." Herbert L. Colston, *Using Figurative Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 95, discusses research showing that by the age of seven, children's production of hyperbole is indistinguishable from that of adults. Raymond W. Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 80–119, argues that the human mind is hardwired to process and understand figurative language such as hyperbole. And Claridge, *Hyperbole in English*, 1, believes that hyperbole "may be wired in the cognitive structuring of our experience: the concept of size, to which exaggeration must primarily be connected, is a very basic and salient one."

⁵⁰ See my discussion of the form and function of hyperbole in chapters 7 and 8 of Charles E. Cruise, *Writing on the Edge: Paul's Use of Hyperbole in Galatians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, forthcoming).

2. The statement conflicts with what Jesus says or does elsewhere.
3. The statement conflicts with Scripture.
4. The statement, if literally fulfilled, would not achieve the desired goal.⁵¹

b. Linguistic criteria. Linguistic criteria involve features of the language of the utterance and/or surrounding text that suggest hyperbole. Universal language, as described above, is often hyperbolic (Criterion 5), as is extreme language (Criterion 6). Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that a context rich in hyperbole would raise the probability of any single instance being hyperbolic, so I propose an additional criterion (Criterion 7).

5. The statement uses universal language (e.g. *all*, *none*, *every*, and *any*)
6. The statement uses extreme or imaginative language
7. The context evidences hyperbole

c. Rhetorical criteria. Hyperbole may be spoken for many purposes—entertainment and complaint among them—but its use in convincing was its most well-known purpose in the first century. With regard to rhetorical criteria, then, it is necessary to discern whether there is an actual rhetorical situation, that is, “a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision of action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (Criterion 8).⁵² The presence of amplification should also be considered to be an indicator of the likelihood of hyperbole, as “amplification is fundamental to the art of persuasion, and hyperbole is the servant of amplification” (Criterion 9).⁵³ Furthermore, as discussed above, hyperbole is gradable and therefore able to be vertically scaled (Criterion 10). The additions to the list of criteria for detecting hyperbole are as follows:

8. The context evidences a rhetorical situation.
9. The context evidences amplification.
10. The statement may be vertically scaled.

2. *Applying the logical criteria.* In this section, the list of logical criteria developed above will be applied to the text of Matt 5:38–42. The first task is to examine the passage for impossibility (Criterion 1). When we do this we find that, unlike Jesus’s statements concerning a log in one’s eye (Matt 7:3–5), swallowing a camel (Matt 23:23–24), or not letting one’s left hand know what the right hand is doing (Matt 6:2–4), each of the prescriptions in Matt 5:38–42 *can be* literally performed: “The commands Jesus gives are difficult but not impossible.”⁵⁴ We must, therefore, rule that Criterion 1 does not fit our passage.

⁵¹ Adapted from Stein, *Difficult Sayings*, 33–86; cf. Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 174–88.

⁵² Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 6.

⁵³ Carol J. Schlueter, *Filling up the Measure: Polemical Hyperbole in 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16* (JSNTSS 98; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 85. Cf. Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, §608, “Repetition is for reinforcement, generally with emotional emphasis.”

⁵⁴ James F. Davis, *Lex Talionis in Early Judaism and the Exhortation of Jesus in Matthew 5:38–42* (LNTS 281; London: T&T Clark, 2005), 149.

Criterion 2 does not appear at first glance to suggest hyperbole in the passage because many feel that Jesus himself modeled Matt 5:39b in his passion (Matt 26:67–68; 27:30; 1 Pet 2:23), perhaps echoing Isa 50:6. Typical is the sentiment expressed by Ulrich Luz:

Here Jesus' own behavior in his passion is their model. Jesus commands the disciple who rushes to help him with his sword to put it away (26:51–54). Jesus too was slapped but he did not resist (26:67). Matthew tells his story as that of the "humble king" . . . who modeled nonviolence in his passion and was led through it by God to the resurrection.⁵⁵

But do these biblical texts really support the positive exhortation to turn the other cheek? Did Jesus make statements or take actions that could have been interpreted by his abusers as a request for, or least complicity in, *further* abuse? No—Jesus modeled only the negative principle, that is, non-retaliation. In the absence of any support for the positive exhortations, we can consider, then, Criterion 2 to be applied to this passage. The statement to turn the other cheek *does* conflict with what Jesus says and does elsewhere, since there is no support for it outside of the present context. Not only this, but in situations where Jesus *could have* turned the other cheek, he did not.

Criterion 3 is applicable with regard to verses 40 and 42. As already noted above, some scholars view verse 40 as hyperbolic in light of the Scriptures that frown upon nudity (Gen 3:7, 10–11; 9:22) or taking a poor person's cloak (Exod 22:25–27; Deut 24:12–13). Likewise, Matt 5:42 is hyperbolic because it, too, conflicts with Scripture:

Within the New Testament there is at least one clear example in which the church is told not to grant the requests of those who beg. In seeking to remedy the problem of those at Thessalonica who, because of their belief in the nearness of the parousia, were no longer working but living off their Christian friends, the apostle Paul states, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If any one will not work, let him not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10). Rather than seeing a contradiction between Jesus and the apostle, it is more reasonable to conclude that Jesus, in teaching of the need to be generous, was exaggerating in MATTHEW 5:42 simply because he did not want to list various exceptions to the general rule.⁵⁶

Criterion 4 fits the situation of verses 39b, 41, and 42 exactly. As argued above, any benefit to the abuser or the abused is speculation. It is just as likely that soliciting further physical abuse (v. 39b) or following a Roman soldier for another mile (v. 41) would have no impact or, worse yet, a negative impact. The victim might wind up even more humiliated and exhausted. When Criterion 4 is applied to verse 42, it is relatively easy to see how unrestrained giving would not actually help

⁵⁵ Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 276–77; cf. Davis, *Lex Talionis*, 4–5, "He voluntarily turned his cheek to the smiter and gave up his garments for the cross."

⁵⁶ Stein, *Difficult Sayings*, 46.

the poor. Such a practice would not be good for either party involved: “Giving anything requested to whoever asks for it would quickly leave the giver a beggar, too, once word of one’s limitless generosity spread.”⁵⁷ Even France, who takes 5:38–42 literally, concedes that “the disciple may be forced to conclude that in an imperfect human society Jesus’ illustrations of these principles could not work as literal rules of conduct, that unlimited generosity to beggars would not only undermine the economic order but also in the end do no good to the beggars themselves.”⁵⁸

3. *Applying the linguistic criteria.* Next, linguistic criteria will be examined. Is there anything in the language of Matt 5:38–42 that acts as an indicator for hyperbole? It is clear from the rhythm and repetition that the passage “shows a consciousness of form.”⁵⁹ The passage begins with the typical “You have heard it said ... but I say to you” formula of the prior antitheses. The negative prohibition is next (*μὴ ἀντιστῆναι*), followed by three positive statements beginning with *ἀλλά* or *καί* and consisting of a reference to a hypothetical individual (*ὅστις* or a substantival participle) and an imperatival clause:

38	<i>Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη</i>	
39	<i>ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν μὴ ἀντιστῆναι τῷ πονηρῷ</i>	
	<i>ἀλλ’ ὅστις σε βιάσῃ ...,</i>	<i>στρέψον</i>
40	<i>καὶ τῷ θέλοντί ...,</i>	<i>ἅψες</i>
41	<i>καὶ ὅστις σε ἀγγαρεύσει ...,</i>	<i>ὑπάγε</i>
42	<i>τῷ αἰτοῦντί ...</i>	<i>δός,</i>
	<i>καὶ τὸν θέλοντα ...</i>	<i>μὴ ἀποστραφῆς.</i>

Verse 42 breaks the pattern, however. It does not start with a coordinating conjunction, and the disciple is no longer pictured as a victim in an abusive situation. “V. 42 may not belong to the original cluster. In vs. 39b–41 the focus is first on what an oppressor does and then on what the hearers can do back; in v. 42 the focus shifts to the hearers and what they should do when another would beg or borrow.”⁶⁰ More will be said on this in the later section on mitigation.

As for Criterion 5, universal language occurs twice in the passage in the form of *ὅστις* (translated by the ESV as “anyone”). This language serves to universalize the situation in which the cheek strike or compulsion to walk a mile might occur.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Keener, *Matthew*, 201.

⁵⁸ France, *Matthew*, 218.

⁵⁹ Tannehill, *Sword of His Mouth*, 68.

⁶⁰ Wink, “Neither Passivity Nor Violence,” 103; cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 547, “Mt 5.42 = Lk 6.30 was originally no doubt isolated. It does not really fit its present context well, which is about revenge and love of enemies; and in 5.42 the disciple is no longer a victim”; Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 275, “In its Matthean wording [verse 42] does not have the exaggeration that is characteristic of vv. 39b–41.”

⁶¹ The two substantival participles, *θέλοντί* and *αἰτοῦντί*, serve much the same function.

In other words, it is not just a particular cheek strike in view, but *any* cheek strike by *any* person.⁶² Such universalizing language increases the likelihood that hyperbole is being used.

The prescriptions in the passage are also extreme (Criterion 6), as Tannehill points out. The blow to the right cheek is extremely insulting, while the loss of both a tunic and a cloak by a very poor person would leave him “not only penniless but naked.”⁶³ The image of forced labor is “something irksome in itself and especially so if imposed by a foreign invader,” while “obeying vs. 42 is very likely to leave a man without money to live on.”⁶⁴ Tannehill concludes, “The extremeness of these commands is due in part to the situations chosen, though these might be excelled by a case of bodily injury. It is due even more to the surprising behavior which is commanded in these situations. Not even the command to not resist in vs. 39a catches the extremeness of the commands which follow.”⁶⁵

Next, for Criterion 7 to be considered, the surrounding context needs to be examined for hyperbole. I propose for analysis the first four antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, as they provide the closest literary parallels with our text. The point is that, if the first four antitheses evidence hyperbole, it raises the probability that the fifth does as well. In other words, it indicates a likelihood that there is a *hyperbolic style* that Jesus is using in this context.

a. *The first four antitheses.* In the first antithesis, framed around the sixth commandment (Exod 20:14), Jesus equates anger with murder and calls for the same consequence—judgment—for both. Anger here is exemplified as verbally insulting a fellow Jew, so divine judgment in that case would be an extreme penalty (Criterion 6). Commentators are in widespread agreement here that, as Betz writes, “The judgment appears to be incommensurate with the seemingly trivial offense” (a misapplication of Scripture, so Criterion 3).⁶⁶ Luz, for instance, notes that “the sentences of v. 22 ... have the character of hyperbole. They want to say that what appears to be an insignificant expression of anger is the equivalent of murder that is subject to heavenly and earthly punishment.”⁶⁷ Second, commentators point out

⁶² Arguably, other situations are in view as well. Tannehill, *Sword of His Mouth*, 73–74, described these verses as “focal instances” in that they are meant to stand in for any number of similar behaviors: “This mode of language refers indirectly to a whole field of situations to which no clear limit can be set. This is the source of the great hermeneutical potential of such language, its power to speak again and again to new situations”; cf. Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 274, “The three examples bring into focus what Jesus means for a much larger area of life. ... In that sense, although these commandments are meant to be obeyed, their intention is not that they simply be obeyed literally; they are to be obeyed in such a way that in new situations what they demand is repeatedly to be discovered anew in freedom but in a similar radicality.”

⁶³ Tannehill, *Sword of His Mouth*, 70.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 221; Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 188; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 509, “making the punishment for anger the same as that for murder (a clear hyperbole).”

⁶⁷ Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 236.

that the establishment of local law courts to handle all of the cases of anger would be impossible (Criterion 1).⁶⁸ And third, a sweeping prohibition against anger is hyperbolic because it conflicts with statements in the NT (Criterion 3)—and Jesus’s own behavior (Criterion 2)—that demonstrate that righteous anger is often appropriate (Matt 21:12; 23:13–33).⁶⁹ Lastly, Jesus instructs his listeners to leave their gift at the altar (rather than offering it) in order to pursue reconciliation with a fellow Jew whom they had wronged. This image of leaving a gift at the temple altar is hyperbolic: “How many of Jesus’ audience actually lived close enough to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill this command literally?” (Criterion 1).⁷⁰

Like the first antithesis, the second one links a severe sin with a less severe sin. In this case, adultery and lust are equated. The first indication of hyperbole, then, is that, if taken literally, the penalty for adultery (death by stoning) would apply for lust also, which is nowhere taught in Scripture (Criterion 3). Here again the punishment is extreme and incommensurate in relation to the crime (Criterion 6). The second part of this passage, verses 29–30, prescribes the remedy for sins of the eye and hand: self-mutilation (Criterion 6). Scholars are virtually unanimous that this command is hyperbolic, as the removal of an eye or hand would not prevent lusting (Criterion 4).⁷¹

In the third antithesis, Jesus paints the image of a wife, spurned by her husband yet still married in the eyes of the Lord, who “commits adultery” by consummating a marriage with her new husband.⁷² In the Second Temple period, a divorce certificate would signal to the divorced wife’s potential husband that she was free to marry anyone whom she chose; hence, adultery was not an issue for those who carried certificates. However, perturbed by the capriciousness by which the men of his day treated divorce, Jesus redefined what a legal divorce—and by consequence, adultery—was. In Jesus’s teaching, a man may not *put away* (the common phrase for divorce) his wife—even if he gives her a certificate—unless she has been unfaithful to him. This teaching is hyperbolic, since, if Jesus is to be taken literally, every wife dismissed by her husband for reasons other than sexual immorality is an adulteress and liable to the penalty for adultery—death by stoning (Criteria 3 and 6).⁷³

⁶⁸ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 219–21; Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 236.

⁶⁹ Keener, *Matthew*, 185; Carson, *Matthew*, 182–83.

⁷⁰ Stein, *Difficult Sayings*, 25; cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 518.

⁷¹ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 121; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 524; France, *Matthew*, 205; Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 238; Stein, *Difficult Sayings*, 9; Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 195; Keener, *Matthew*, 186–87; Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 83; Craig A. Evans, *Matthew* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 124; Roy B. Zuck, *Teaching as Jesus Taught* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 195.

⁷² Talbert, *Matthew*, 84, “Jesus’s assumption must be that the woman is still the first husband’s wife.”

⁷³ Keener, *Matthew*, 192, “Jesus used hyperbole to underline graphically a controversial point. . . . Jesus’ central point, which the hyperbolic image is meant to evoke, is the sanctity of marriage.”

By the first century, oath taking had become an abused practice, leading to Jesus's injunction against it in the fourth antithesis.⁷⁴ The goal of his teaching is to challenge people to honor their word when they make commitments to one another. In the process, however, Jesus forbids any oath taking whatsoever: "Do not take an oath at all" (5:34). This statement is hyperbolic for the following reasons. First, Jesus let himself be placed under an oath (Matt 26:63–64) and failed to prohibit oaths when rebuking the Pharisees (Matt 23:16–22), hence Criterion 2 is met. Second, Jesus's teaching would seem to conflict with Paul's own invocation of God as a witness to his truthfulness on a few occasions (Criterion 3; see Rom 1:9; Gal 1:20; 2 Cor 1:23). Third, the phrase "at all" in verse 34 constitutes universal language (Criterion 5).⁷⁵

b. *The fifth antithesis.* The first four antitheses are therefore judged to be hyperbolic based on the ten criteria developed in the section on methodology. This demonstrates that the antitheses are characterized by a hyperbolic style and suggests that the fifth antithesis could be hyperbolic as well.

4. *Applying the rhetorical criteria.* Is Jesus engaged in the art of persuasion in Matt 5:38–42, and if so, what is the impetus, or rhetorical situation (Criterion 8)? The exigency undergirding Jesus's remarks is made explicit in verse 38: it concerns the abuses to *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation. *Lex talionis* was fairly common throughout the ancient world: "Widespread literary evidence—from the Code of Hammurabi and the Middle Assyrian Laws to Greek, Roman, and Jewish formulations, both scriptural and rabbinic—points to the virtual universality of such a 'law of retaliation.'"⁷⁶ It was designed to ensure just compensation for victims and, as specified in the OT, to require judges to mete out the full penalty for a wrongdoing. By the first century, financial compensation had come to be the preferred mode of restitution.⁷⁷ Victims of wrongdoing could sue for damages, pain, healing, loss of time, and disgrace.⁷⁸ One can surmise from the nature of Jesus's teaching that many Jews of his era had become litigious, quick to sue each other for minor infractions, and in so doing were bringing injury upon the very relationships which bound them together as God's people.

If Jesus made a conscious choice to utilize hyperbole (recall from earlier that hyperbole is characterized by intentionality), to what end did he do it? Jesus's aim was to engage his audience emotionally by shocking them mentally. It is a prime

⁷⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 128, "Oaths became a way of avoiding responsibility."

⁷⁵ Stein, *Difficult Sayings*, 80, "A statement which uses universal language may contain exaggeration." For the view that the fourth antithesis is hyperbole see *ibid.*, 93: "Matt 5:34 ... contain[s] exaggerated language"; David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary: A Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), 28–29, "The early believers understood Yeshua not as prohibiting all vows but as prohibiting vain oaths."

⁷⁶ Dorothy Jean Weaver, "Transforming Nonresistance: From *Lex Talionis* to 'Do Not Resist the Evil One,'" in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament* (ed. Willard M. Swartley; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 37.

⁷⁷ Davis, *Lex Talionis*, 54.

⁷⁸ *m. B. Qam.* 8:1.

example of what Stein calls commissive language in the Bible, perlocutionary utterances which have as their “main goal evoking decisions, conveying emotions, eliciting feelings, arousing sentiment, and affecting change.”⁷⁹ The Semitic style, then, was not just cerebral but emotional. Jesus sought to:

speak with sufficient imaginative force to touch those fundamental images, those prerational visions of self and world, which determine how we think and what we are. Such force, in spite of some clear tendencies toward hyperbole in the Gospels, is not just a matter of shouting loudly and going to extremes. By a variety of means the Gospels speak with strong personal impact, challenging fundamental assumptions, thereby requiring the imagination to awake from its slumbers and interpret the world anew. That is why it is appropriate to speak of *forceful* and *imaginative* language.⁸⁰

Hyperbole provided the vehicle in communication through which ideas could be emphasized by things becoming extraordinarily large, numerous, faster, or challenging.⁸¹

More specifically, Jesus’s aim was to build a fence around the *lex talionis*, to keep his followers from abusing it through petty retaliatory endeavors. These endeavors crossed the line into sin, violating the principles of neighborly love and restraint from taking vengeance into one’s own hands (Lev 19:18).

Moving on to Criterion 9, the passage shares strikingly similar features to Quintilian’s amplification by accumulation described above. Each prescription echoes the same basic idea as the one before it, adding increasing force to the whole elocution. Given, then, that Jesus appears to be attempting to amplify his message, the likelihood for hyperbole (another form of amplification) is increased.

As for Criterion 10, recall that a hyperbole can be conceived of in terms of a vertical scale. To do so for Matt 5:38–42 requires discovering what the prescriptions have in common. The first three (those concerning nonretaliation) can all be expressed in terms of an economy of giving and taking. A perpetrator takes something—dignity (5:39b), property (5:40), or freedom (5:41)—for which the victim is

⁷⁹ Stein, *Basic Guide*, 68.

⁸⁰ Tannehill, *Sword of His Mouth*, 26–27.

⁸¹ For compilations of hyperbole in Jesus’s teaching, see Stein, *Difficult Sayings*; Herchel H. Sheets, *When Jesus Exaggerated: The Master’s Hyperboles* (Lima, OH: C.S.S., 1977); Claude C. Douglas, *Overstatement in the New Testament* (New York: Henry Holt, 1931). The Semitic style utilizing hyperbole can also be seen throughout the OT. See Ernst Jenni, “Sprachliche Übertreibungen im Alten Testament,” in *Sprache—Bilder—Klänge: Dimensionen der Theologie im Alten Testament und in seinem Umfeld* (ed. Christiane Karrer-Grube et al.; AOAT 359; Münster: Ugarit, 2009), 76–83; Ian Heinrich Eybers, “Some Examples of Hyperbole in Biblical Hebrew,” in *Semitics, Vol. 1* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1970), 38–49; C. V. Anthony, “The Hebrew Hyperbole,” *Methodist Review* 87 (1905): 742–44; Wilfred G. E. Watson, “Hebrew Poetry,” in *Text in Context: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study* (ed. A. D. H. Mayes; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 277; Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (JSOTSup 26; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 318–19; D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 43–44.

entitled to retribution under the principle of *lex talionis*.⁸² The victim then has a choice of whether to assert their rights under *lex talionis* or to relinquish those rights and forgive the debt owed by the perpetrator (Figure 3). In the absurd (hyperbolic) scenario, the victim can extend forgiveness even further, to the point of giving additionally of their dignity, property, or freedom.

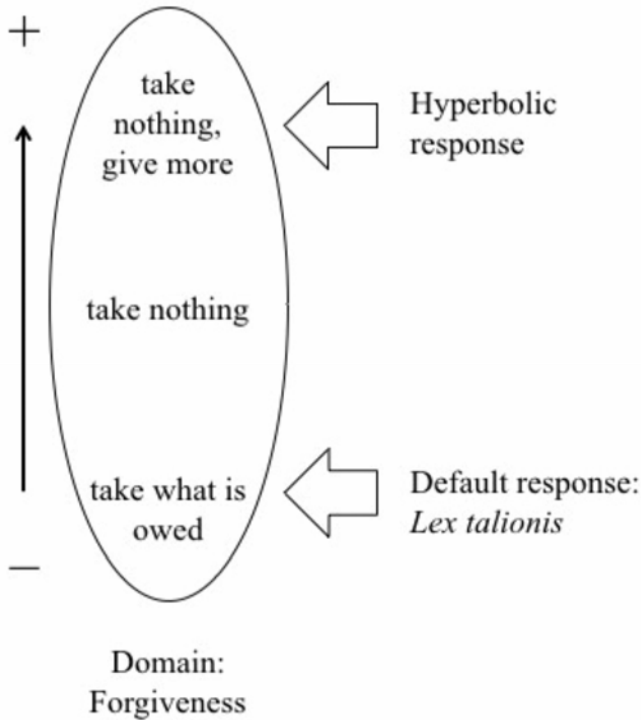


Figure 3: Matt 5:38–42 as a Vertical Scalar Proposition

III. MITIGATING HYPERBOLE

Once the hyperbole is reworked in terms of a vertical scale, the required mitigation process is readily apparent (Figure 4). Mitigating to one point below the hyperbolic response brings us to the “take nothing” option, which may also be called the “disciple’s response,” since it is the intended level of meaning for Jesus’s disciples. Thus, his disciples are called to not assert their rights under *lex talionis*. The hyperbolic option of giving more is simply that—a method of teaching meant to surprise, not to be followed literally.

⁸² With the majority of interpreters, I view the slap on the right cheek to be an insult (i.e. a blow with the back of the right hand).

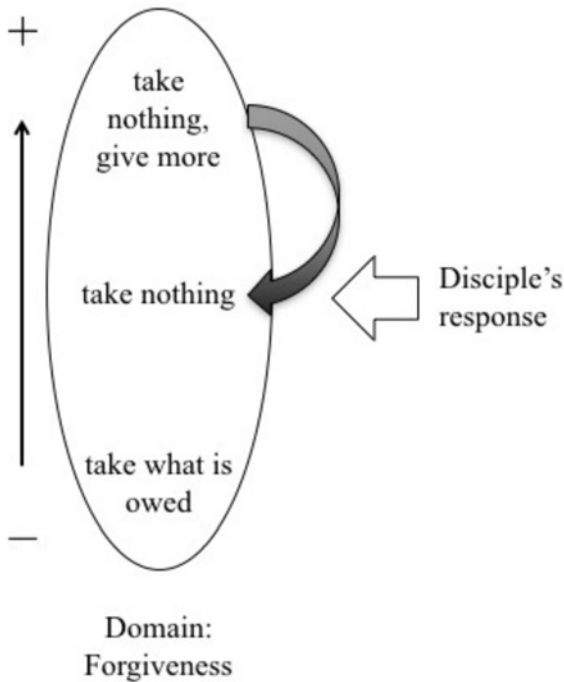


Figure 4: Mitigation of the Hyperbolic Response.

That still leaves verse 42 for consideration. By conceptualizing the preceding verses in terms of an economy of giving and taking and by vertically scaling them, the logical connection between verse 42 and the rest of the passage is now exposed. Verses 39b–41 describe giving over and above what is reasonable, and so does verse 42. Though not linguistically connected with the three prescriptions before it, one is able to see why it was placed where it was.

IV. CONCLUSION

Interpreting the “hard” teaching of Jesus in Matt 5:38–42 has been facilitated through the process of recognizing it as hyperbolic and mitigating it appropriately. Once scaled down, the teaching may be seen as simply encouraging nonretaliation or, in other words, forgiveness of an offense. Contrary to the hyperbolic “turn the other cheek,” the principle of forgiveness finds abundant support in the NT (Matt 6:12, 14–15; 18:21–35; Mark 11:25; Luke 11:4; 17:3–4; Rom 12:14, 17; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13; Phlm 18; 1 Pet 3:9).

While not necessarily arriving at a novel interpretation of the passage, the methodology of this study has been more systematic than that which has been applied to this passage in the past. A tripartite analysis was accomplished using ten

criteria. Nine out of the ten criteria for hyperbole were met by the passage (Figure 5).

This finding of hyperbole in Matt 5:38–42 opens up avenues for further research, including clarification on two interpretive issues. As for the first, *μὴ ἀντιστέλλειν*, it might be expected that the present investigation would favor the rendering “do not seek retaliation,” given the clear emphasis on non-retaliation in the *lex talionis* and in the passage’s first three prescriptions. However, it could just as well be taken as “do not resist (evil),” but in a hyperbolic sense. Either interpretation is in line with the conclusions of this study.

Hyperbole Scorecard for Matthew 5:38–42

Logical aspects

- 1. The statement is literally impossible
- 2. The statement conflicts with what Jesus says or does elsewhere
- 3. The statement conflicts with Scripture
- 4. The statement, if literally fulfilled, would not achieve the desired goal

Linguistic aspects

- 5. The statement uses universal language
- 6. The statement uses extreme language
- 7. The context evidences hyperbole

Rhetorical aspects

- 8. The context evidences a rhetorical situation
- 9. The context evidences amplification
- 10. The statement may be vertically scaled

Figure 5. Hyperbole Scorecard

Second is the status of *lex talionis*, an issue on which this study does not rule definitively. However, in light of the finding of hyperbole, I do not believe we can say that Jesus contradicted or abrogated *lex talionis*.⁸³ Rather, I suggest that he was dissatisfied with the abuses of it and therefore used hyperbolic teaching in an at-

⁸³ Contra Carson, *Matthew*, 189, who believes that “Jesus’ teaching formally contradicts the OT law.”

tempt to return his followers to its undergirding principle: love of neighbor. In other words, forgiveness is a way of ensuring that *lex talionis* is not abused.