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Ancient *Bioi* and Luke's Modifications of Matthew's Longer Discourses

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Abstract

Matthew's Gospel is known for its long, flowing discourses. The speeches in Luke, by contrast, are shorter and scattered throughout his narrative. Some believe this difference is evidence against the so-called 'Farrer hypothesis' – the view that Luke used both Mark and Matthew as sources. One response, however, is that Luke wanted to bring his speech lengths into closer conformity with the literary standards of Greco-Roman *bioi*. An analysis of seventeen representative *bioi* suggests that Matthew's speeches were exceptionally long for medium-sized biographies such as his own. This fact provides a plausible literary motivation for Luke to abbreviate Matthew's discourses.

Keywords: Synoptic problem; Greco-Roman biographies; speech lengths; Sermon on the Mount

1. Introduction

Proponents of Austin Farrer's solution to the Synoptic problem affirm two theses: (i) Matthew used Mark in composing his Gospel, and (ii) Luke used both Mark and Matthew.¹ Part of the strength of the view lies in its theoretical parsimony. Unlike its main rival, the two-source hypothesis (2SH), Farrer's position obviates the need to postulate the existence of an independent sayings source (Q) in order to account for the large agreements between Luke and Matthew. One can explain Lukan features by affirming that the evangelist used Mark as his narrative backbone and then drew on Matthean material when he found the latter suitable to his purposes.

A central line of attack against the Farrer hypothesis (FH) is the perceived implausibility that Luke would have organised Matthew's material in the way he allegedly did. Why would Luke, for example, take the elegant, flowing Matthean discourses, cut them up, and scatter some of them throughout his own Gospel? Werner G. Kümmel is perplexed: 'What could possibly have motivated L[uke] ... to shatter M[atthew]'s sermon on the mount, placing part of it in his sermon on the plain, dividing up other parts among various chapters of his Gospel, and letting the rest drop out of sight?'² In light of this type of objection, defenders of the FH have advanced a number of reasons that would make

¹ A. M. Farrer, 'On Dispensing with Q', *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot* (ed. D. E. Nineham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955) 55–88. Farrer's most formidable defenders include M. D. Goulder (*Luke: A New Paradigm* (2 vols.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989)); M. Goodacre (*The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002)); and F. Watson (*Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013)).

² W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. H. C. Kee; rev. edn; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991) 64.

Luke's editing more understandable. Perhaps Luke thought his own configuration was more appropriate; perhaps he had theological motivations for spreading out Matthew's discourses. I lay out a number of these options later in this article.

My objective is to propose a different sort of incentive for Luke's abbreviating Matthew's discourses: his modifications are the result of wanting to bring his Gospel into closer conformity with the literary standards of Greco-Roman biographies.³ While the various characteristics of ancient *bioi* fall along a spectrum, I provide data from seventeen sources which indicate that uninterrupted speeches in ancient *bioi* had a strong tendency to be shorter – much shorter – than what we find in Matthew, especially relative to the Gospel's length. Moreover, Luke's literary style is widely recognised as the most sophisticated among the Gospels.⁴ It seems reasonable, therefore, to suppose that Luke is bringing his Matthean source, along with the latter's lengthy discourses, into closer adherence to classical standards of Greco-Roman *bioi*. If this thesis is correct, it represents one further explanation of why Luke had ample reason to modify his Matthean source.

2. Matthew's Numbers and Luke's Modifications

It will help to begin with a more informed exposition of the Matthean passages under discussion. For present purposes, I focus on continuous speeches that lack a change in subject – i.e. discourses that do not include interruptions by Jesus' disciples, the Pharisees, the crowds and so on. Luke often punctuates Jesus' speeches with small narrative interruptions such as 'Then Jesus said ...' or 'Turning to his disciples, he said ...'⁵ Luke's speeches would be much shorter if we were to count these as narrative breaks. In my analysis, however, I overlook such small interruptions and regard the speeches as continuous, barring changes in subjects.

The two longest continuous Matthean speeches occur in Matt 5.3–7.27 and Matt 24.4–25.46. The first of these, the Sermon on the Mount, contains an astonishing 1,933 words.⁶ It is composed of at least twenty-three shorter sections including the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer, and each topic flows without transition into the next. The second passage, Matt 24.4–25.46, is slightly shorter and runs at 1,494 words.⁷ Here we have Jesus' eschatological discourse: the predictions about the temple's destruction, the future persecutions, the parables involving watchfulness and the ultimate judgement by the Son of Man.

Let us consider each section individually and note how, according to Farrer theorists, Luke has modified Matthew. Table 1 details Luke's changes in the Sermon on the Mount.

³ On the biographical nature of the gospels, see C. H. Talbert, *What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); R. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (25th anniversary edn; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018); and C. S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019). For a dissenting voice, see A. Yarbro Collins, 'Genre and the Gospels', *The Journal of Religion* 75 (1995) 239–46.

⁴ See H. J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (London: SPCK, 1958) 4; H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1: *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 108. While Luke's style and vocabulary are superior to that of other Gospels, this is not to say that his rhetoric reaches the heights of true Greek classics. For differences, see A. Wifstrand, *Epochs and Styles: Selected Writings on the New Testament, Greek Language and Greek Culture in the Post-Classical Era* (ed. L. Rydbeck and S. E. Porter; trans. D. Searby; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 35.

⁵ The way in which interruptions function in Luke (and the other Gospels) may correspond to certain theological aims. On this, see D. L. Smith, *The Rhetoric of Interruption: Speech-Making, Turn-Taking, and Rule-Breaking in Luke-Acts and Ancient Greek Narrative* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), esp. 186–210.

⁶ All NT word counts are based on the Nestle Aland 28th edition.

⁷ The word count would total 2,137 if one were to include the preceding section, Matt 23.2–39. To do this, however, one would have to overlook a brief aside involving the disciples in Matt 24.1–3. So, in accordance with the criteria of counting a subject change as an interruption, I proceed with 1,494 as the relevant figure.

Table 1. Modifications to the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount	Location	Luke's Use on the Farrer Hypothesis
The Beatitudes	5.3–12	Reduces to four beatitudes (6.20b–23) but adds 'woes' as corollaries.
Salt and Light	5.13–16	Divides and moves to 8.16, 14.34–35.
The Law and the Prophets	5.17–20	Moves first half to 16.16–17; omits second half.
Concerning Anger	5.21–6	Omits first half; moves second half to 12.57–9.
Concerning Adultery	5.27–30	Omits entirely.
Concerning Divorce	5.31–2	Compresses into one verse and moves to 16.18.
Concerning Oaths	5.33–7	Omits entirely.
Concerning Retaliation	5.38–42	Reduces to two verses (6.29–30).
Love for Enemies	5.43–8	Retains but expands slightly by including economic focus (6.27–8, 32–6).
Concerning Almsgiving	6.1–4	Omits entirely.
Concerning Prayer	6.5–6	Omits entirely.
The Lord's Prayer	6.7–15	Reduces and moves to 11.1–4.
Concerning Fasting	6.16–18	Omits entirely.
Concerning Treasures	6.19–21	Moves to 12.33–4.
The Sound Eye	6.22–3	Moves to 11.34–6.
Serving Two Masters	6.24	Retains in 6.13.
Do Not Worry	6.25–34	Moves to 12.22–32.
Judging Others	7.1–5	Retains and adds approximately four verses (6.37–42).
Profaning the Holy	7.6	Omits entirely.
Ask, Search, Knock	7.7–11	Moves to 11.9–13.
The Golden Rule	7.12	Retains approximate length (6.31).
The Narrow Gate	7.13–14	Converts to dialogue form and moves to 13.23–24.
A Tree and Its Fruit	7.15–20	Retains approximate length (6.43–45).
Saying, 'Lord, Lord'	7.21–3	Retains first verse but moves the rest to 13.25–27.
House Built upon a Rock	7.24–7	Retains approximate length (6.47–49).

The Sermon on the Mount, as mentioned above, contains 1,933 words. After Luke's changes, his Sermon on the Plain is left with 569 words, only 29 per cent of the length of the original. As [Table 1](#) indicates, the types of modifications come in at least three forms (or a combination of them): *direct omission* of a particular topic (adultery, almsgiving, oaths), *relocation* to a different place in the Gospel (the Sound Eye, the passage on worrying) and *reduction* (the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer). Now, in several cases, Luke has introduced new elements into his Sermon on the Plain, but the material he has brought in fits neatly within the context. The woes (6.24–5), for instance, function as antitheses to the remaining Beatitudes and reflect the Lukan emphasis on the reversal

of fortunes.⁸ Similarly, Luke imports the saying about the blind leading the blind from Matt 10.14 into Luke 6.39. The reason for the latter is clear: Luke's immediate context contains the pericope about removing the speck from a brother's eye (Matt 7.3–5 // Luke 6.41–2). Even with these additions, Luke's final product is drastically shorter. Much of it is omitted, and much else is shifted to other places.

The second major block of Matthean discourse is Matt 24.4–25.46. The Lukan modifications are indicated in Table 2. Matthew's eschatological discourse adds up to 1,494 words, and Luke has reduced it to 30 per cent of its original length, leaving his shorter speech at 442 words. We should note that Luke has for the most part replicated Mark 13 in this section,⁹ and the Matthean additions have been either omitted or relocated. Luke's reduction in this passage, however, should not be attributed to his slavishly following Mark's length. After all, he reduces the length of Markan material elsewhere.¹⁰ The best explanation is that Luke has intended to shorten and redistribute Matthew's eschatological discourse, and his Markan source delivers a structure of adequate length.

Given that Luke has reduced Matthew in this way, how long are his own speeches? Again, if our word count is based on lack of subject changes, then Luke has five longer discourses. Ordered by length, they are 384 words (Luke 16.15–17.4), 442 words (Luke 21.8–36), 486 words (Luke 17.20–18.14),¹¹ 569 words (Luke 6.20–49) and 778 words (Luke 15.4–16.13).¹² Luke's longest uninterrupted speech is therefore roughly a third of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, and about half of the latter's second longest discourse. Moreover, Matthew and Luke contain roughly the same number of words (18,300 vs 19,400). Relative to these lengths, the Sermon on the Mount constitutes 10.6 per cent of Matthew, and Luke's longest speech amounts to 4 per cent of his Gospel.

3. Attempts to Explain Luke's Modifications

Advocates of the 2SH often interpret the above data as a strike against the Farrer hypothesis. The reasoning proceeds as follows: Matthew's venerated Sermon on the Mount is arranged elegantly; the material it contains fits appropriately in its context. On the FH, however, we must suppose that Luke has undone this sophisticated arrangement, eliminating and/or redistributing the Matthean fragments around his Gospel. And this procedure – the argument goes – is unthinkable. Even as early as 1924, Burnett Hillman Streeter had denounced the idea that Luke had broken up and reappropriated Matthew's Sermon. For Streeter, this idea would imply that Luke took 'utmost care to tear' the relevant Matthean pieces out of their 'exceedingly appropriate' contexts – a strategy which would be tenable only if 'we had reason to believe [Luke] was a crank'.¹³ Similarly,

⁸ E.g. Luke 1.46–55; 14.7–24; 16.19–31; 18.9–14.

⁹ Though not completely: Mark 13.15–19 and Matt 24.17–21 are in near-complete agreement, Luke omits the entire section except for 21.23.

¹⁰ The parables in Mark 4.3–32, for example, consist of roughly 500 words, and Luke (8.5–16) reduces his corresponding section by nearly 40 per cent.

¹¹ Here I include one minor change in subject at Luke 17.37.

¹² It is possible, of course, to alter the criteria for counting words. For example, one might examine passages more broadly and overlook changes in subjects. In that case, Luke's middle discourse, which is interrupted by a reaction from the Pharisees, would add up to roughly 1,100 words. However, we would then need to modify Matthew's second speech plausibly to include the prior section about Jesus' denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees and his Lament over Jerusalem (Matt 23.2–39). In that case, the length of Matthew's second passage would add up to over 2,200 words. In order to avoid the need to adjudicate what is considered a narrative break, I leave the criterion as described.

¹³ B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins, Treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, & Dates* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1924) 183. In many ways, Streeter should be credited for setting the agenda for English scholarship on the Synoptic problem.

Table 2. Modifications to Matthew's Eschatological Speech

Matthew's Eschatological Speech	Location	Luke's Use on the Farrer Hypothesis
Signs of the End Age	24.4–8	Retains approximate length (21.8–11).
Persecutions Foretold	24.9–14	Retains approximate length (21.11–19).
The Desolating Sacrilege	24.15–28	Retains first half (21.20–4); omits second.
Coming of the Son of Man	24.29–31	Retains approximate length (21.25–8).
The Lesson of the Fig Tree	24.32–5	Retains approximate length (21.29–33).
The Necessity for Watchfulness	24.36–44	Reduces from 151 words to 88 words (21.34–6).
The Faithful or the Unfaithful Slave	24.45–51	Moves to 12.41–6.
Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids	25.1–13	Omits entirely.
Parable of the Talents	25.14–30	Moves to 19.11–27.
The Judgement of the Nations	25.31–46	Omits entirely.

Heinrich Holtzmann had characterised Luke's policy as 'wantonly' breaking up Matthew's 'great structures'.¹⁴ More recently, Graham Stanton has stated that Luke would have 'virtually demolished Matthew's carefully constructed discourses'.¹⁵ Clearly, such disapproval is thinly veiled! But is it warranted? The argument hinges, of course, on the supposition that if Luke had known Matthew, he would not have redistributed the material in the way FH theorists envision. And what reason undergirds this supposition? Presumably it is the judgement that Matthew's long, flowing discourses were appropriate, decorous, and fashionable, so that there was no need to alter them.

The easiest way for FH theorists to rebut the above argument is to furnish some possible reasons why Luke would have found his own arrangement preferable. For instance, Luke might have had pragmatic considerations in mind: perhaps he thought that the length of Matthew's discourses made them difficult to read or hear in one sitting.¹⁶ The sheer range of topics covered in the Sermon on the Mount – more than twenty-three flowing disparate themes – might have been overwhelming. Michael D. Goulder judges: 'Matthew's Sermon is far too long. Who can take in so much spiritual richness in a single gulp?'¹⁷ A different response highlights the inherently subjective element in classifying Matthew's grandiose narratives as more 'elegant' or 'appealing' than Luke's. Appealing to whom?¹⁸ Perhaps they were not appealing to Luke – perhaps his own arrangement

¹⁴ H. J. Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien: Ihr Ursprung und geschichtlicher Charakter* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1863) 130. I translate 'muthwillig' as 'wantonly'. Interestingly, Holtzmann thinks it more likely that Matthew has built his 'walls' out of Luke's 'pile of stones': 'Was ist an sich wahrscheinlicher: dass Lucas die grossen Bauten muthwillig zerschlagen und die Trümmer nach allen vier Winden auseinandergesprenkt, oder dass Matthäus jene Mauern aus den Steinhaufen des Lucas erbaut habe?'

¹⁵ G. Stanton, 'Matthew, Gospel of', *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden; London: Press, 1990) 432–6, at 434. For similar statements, see Kümmel, *Introduction*, 64; R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995²) xvi; J. S. Kloppenborg, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 41.

¹⁶ Goulder, *Luke*, 40–1.

¹⁷ Goulder, *Luke*, 347.

¹⁸ Part of the intuitive appeal of Matthew's version is due undoubtedly to the immense reverence towards the Sermon of the Mount throughout Christian history. Luke Timothy Johnson notes: 'In the history of Christian thought – indeed in the history of those observing Christianity – the Sermon on the Mount has been considered an epitome of the teaching of Jesus and therefore, for many, the essence of Christianity' (L. T. Johnson, 'The

had a greater aesthetic draw.¹⁹ Indeed, one might equally question whether Matthew's prolonged narratives are superior.²⁰

Some have argued, alternatively, that Luke has a discernable method in adjusting the Matthean material. Francis Watson identifies what he calls a 'simple compositional procedure' that Luke follows which involves, for instance, juxtaposing large-scale blocks of material and redistributing a significant number of Matthean sayings throughout his own journey narrative.²¹ Another motivation for Luke might have been theological.²² Mark Goodacre, for instance, suggests that Luke adopts the Markan motif of the Way of the Lord, a theme which Mark takes from Isaiah.²³ Theologically, the Way of the Lord provides the narrative structure for Luke, and this structure allows him to distribute Matthean material throughout his own Gospel. All these reasons – pragmatic, aesthetic, procedural, theological – are not mutually exclusive. And the more reasons provided for Luke's modifications, the less weight the objection carries.²⁴

In what follows, I advance another reason why Luke reduces and distributes Matthew's lengthy discourses. This reason has to do with the genre of the Gospels. Since the publication of Richard Burridge's book, *What are the Gospels?*, scholarship has come to (re)recognise that the four canonical Gospels fall under the genre of Greco-Roman biography.²⁵ One of the consequences of this shift has been the profitable literary, rhetorical and historical analysis of the Gospels once they are situated against the backdrop of classical works of the same genre, e.g. the *Lives* of Plutarch or Suetonius.²⁶ Part of the ensuing challenge (and charm) is that the generic term 'Greco-Roman biography' does not pick out any sort of well-defined essence so that any literary work either has or does not have that essence. Instead, the genre serves to set apart a group of works that share various family resemblances.²⁷ This fact allows significant diversity among ancient biographies, and it

Sermon on the Mount', *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (ed. A. Hastings; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 654).

¹⁹ Farrer declares: 'All we have to show is that St. Luke's plan was capable of attracting St. Luke. You do not like what I have done to the garden my predecessor left me. You are welcome to your opinion, but I did what I did because I thought I should prefer the new arrangement. And if you want to enjoy whatever special merit my gardening has, you must forget my predecessor's idea and try to appreciate mine' (Farrer, 'Dispensing', 65).

²⁰ This point applies especially to the Sermon on the Mount's second half, which Stanton labels a 'rag-bag' of sayings and Fitzmyer refers to as a 'series of loosely related sayings' (G. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 298; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke 1-IX* (ABC 28; New York: Doubleday, 1981); see also Goodacre, *Case Against Q*, 99–100.

²¹ For details see Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 156–216.

²² Mark Matson also notes that Luke's ordering has a 'distinctive theology' (M. Matson, 'Luke's Rewriting of the Sermon on the Mount', *Questioning Q* (ed. M. Goodacre and N. Perrin; London: SPCK, 2004) 43–70, at 64; Goulder, *Luke*, 40.

²³ M. Goodacre, 'Re-Walking the "Way of the Lord": Luke's Use of Mark and his Reaction to Matthew', *Luke's Literary Creativity* (ed. M. Müller and J. T. Nielsen; Library of New Testament Studies 550; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016) 26–43.

²⁴ What I have described, of course, does not exhaust FH theorists' responses. For example, Goodacre and Matson highlight the fact that Luke often omits material from the Sermon on the Mount that would be less relevant or unappealing to Luke's gentile audience (Goodacre, *Case against Q*, 95–6; Matson, 'Luke's Rewriting', 49).

²⁵ See n. 3 for references. Charles Talbert is on record for claiming that Burridge's volume 'ought to end any legitimate denials of the canonical Gospels' biographical character' (C. Talbert, 'Review of Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*', *JBL* 112 (1993) 714–15, at 715.

²⁶ M. R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Keener, *Christobiography*.

²⁷ Some of these family resemblances include introductory material, an ancestry/genealogy, a birth narrative, tales of early childhood that anticipate the protagonist's later character qualities, sayings and a death narrative. See Burridge, *Gospels*, 105–23.

also establishes a sort of spectrum on which some may be considered more ‘standard’ than others.

The diversity among Greco-Roman *bioi* also allows one to understand certain variations among the Gospels. While the Gospels share many features, each has its own style and emphases. In comparison with the other Gospels, for instance, Luke more closely corresponds to Greek classical style with respect to its rhetorical and literary construction.²⁸ Consequently, some advocates of the FH have suggested that Luke’s modifications can be explained in terms of his bringing his Gospel into closer conformity with classical standards suitable to Greco-Roman *bioi*.²⁹ With respect to the Sermon on the Mount, Luke’s catalyst for shortening Matthew’s lengthy discourses was that he was aware that *bioi* most often contained shorter rather than longer speeches. Now, clearly, the claim is not that long, uninterrupted speeches were impossible or that ancient biographers never wrote that way. After all, Matthew also fits the description of a Greco-Roman *bios*.³⁰ The claim is rather that among the classical works properly labelled ‘ancient biography’ the speeches were generally much shorter than what we find in Matthew. Luke therefore has precedent for introducing his modifications.³¹

What arguments support the position that Greco-Roman *bioi* generally favoured shorter speeches? Scholars who have advanced this view have typically adopted what we may call a *prescriptive* approach. In other words, they point to ancient works that functioned to instruct, guide or prescribe how acceptable classical rhetoric ought to be written. Heather Gorman, for instance, draws attention to Greek *progymnasmata*, sets of exercises that ancient authors would have used to develop their rhetorical skills. She also touches upon rhetorical handbooks such as we find in Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*.³² From the *progymnasmata* and rhetorical handbooks, we learn that ancient authors often focused on three primary ‘rhetorical virtues’: clarity (σαφήνεια), conciseness (συντομία) and credibility (πιθανότης).³³ Aelius Theon, for example, describes clarity as the quality an author achieves when he or she ‘does not narrate many things together but brings each to its completion’.³⁴ Similarly, Theon claims that conciseness involves ‘signifying the most important of the facts, not adding what is not necessary nor omitting what is necessary to the subject and style. Conciseness arises from the contents when we do not combine many things together’.³⁵ Gorman believes that all three rhetorical virtues are at play in Luke’s Gospel. She argues, moreover, that Luke may be exemplifying the

²⁸ See n. 4. Of course, Luke’s elevated literary status in no way detracts from its Jewish content and concerns.

²⁹ Alex Damm, for instance, has written an entire monograph showing how ancient rhetorical features can shed light on the Synoptic Problem (A. Damm, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Synoptic Problem: Clarifying Markan Priority* (Leuven; Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2013). Damm’s valuable contribution, however, does not focus extensively on the narrower subject of this paper. For this reason, I engage in more detail with Heather Gorman’s work below.

³⁰ See C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 16–24.

³¹ One might respond that Luke includes longer speeches in Acts. I address this objection later.

³² H. M. Gorman, ‘Crank of Creative Genius? How Ancient Rhetoric Makes Sense of Luke’s Order’, *Markan Priority Without Q: Explorations in the Farrer Hypothesis* (ed. J. C. Poirier and J. Peterson; New York: Bloomsbury, 2015) 62–81.

³³ Theon, *Prog.* 79; Aphthonius, *Prog.* 22; Nicolaus, *Prog.* 14. Quintilian (*Inst.* 4.2.31) correspondingly prescribes that court speeches should be lucid (*lucidus*), brief (*brevis*) and plausible (*verisimilis*). Citations found in Gorman, ‘Crank’, 71.

³⁴ Theon, *Prog.* 80. Translation by George Alexander Kennedy in his *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 30. For a discussion on Luke’s implementation of rhetorical principles found in Quintilian, see Robert Morgenthaler, *Lukas und Quintilian: Rhetorik als Erzählkunst* (Zürich: Gotthelf, 1993), esp. 191–363.

³⁵ Theon, *Prog.* 83 (translation from Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 32). See *Inst.* 4.2.40 for similar remarks by Quintilian.

virtue of conciseness or brevity when the Evangelist shortens Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Luke's editorial activity, in other words, is on display as he makes Matthew's lengthy material shorter, thereby bringing his final product into closer conformity with ancient rhetorical virtues such as those described in the *progymnasmata*.³⁶

Gorman's approach serves as a valuable way of defending the position that Luke's modifications may be in line with his Greco-Roman influence – a view that is often asserted in passing but is generally left unsubstantiated.³⁷ There are, however, two drawbacks to this approach. First, it is doubtful that such rhetorical prescriptions, even if authors were familiar with them, were always followed. Modern English students, for example, may learn certain norms or directions for writing a novel; it is doubtful, however, whether those guidelines are always (or even usually) implemented. Second, it is uncertain how the rhetorical virtues described in the *progymnasmata* would have been applied across different genres and categories. Brevity in a historical monograph, for example, will presumably differ from brevity in a court room speech; and these types will differ from brevity in a Greco-Roman biography. It seems to me, however, that there is a way to strengthen this sort of argument. It involves supplementing Gorman's *prescriptive* project with a *descriptive* one: we ought to look into Greco-Roman *bioi* themselves as our starting points. After examining length of speeches within them, we may then proceed to conclusions about Luke's literary style.

4. Speech Length in Greco-Roman Biographies

As we saw earlier, works within a genre are related by certain family resemblances and thereby fall on a spectrum. Scholars often cite a handful of writings as representatives of the biographical genre. Burridge's volume contains an examination of such works written across a span of 600 years. I take his list as my starting point, and I have added several others.³⁸ Table 3 summarises the length of the speeches found within those works.³⁹ One conclusion that may be gathered from the data is that speeches generally tended to be quite short. The case of Philostratus' massive work, *Life of Apollonius*, appears to be an exception to this rule, and I will comment on it separately. Among the rest of the works, twelve contain either no speeches or speeches that are less than 200 words.⁴⁰ The *Life of Aesop*, Philo's *Life of Moses* and Tacitus' *Agricola* have speeches that are slightly

³⁶ Gorman, 'Crank', 67–73. Here Gorman is principally following M. W. Martin, 'Progymnastic Topic Lists: A Compositional Template for Luke and Other *Bioi*?', *NTS* 54 (2008) 18–41.

³⁷ Burridge, for example, notes briefly that Luke often places Matthew's speeches in narrative contexts in which Jesus answers his interlocutors' questions. This, Burridge suggests, 'may be evidence ... of Luke's attempt to conform his gospel more closely to *Bioi*' (Burridge, *Gospels*, 191).

³⁸ Among the works Burridge examines, the only one I leave out is Satyrus' *Euripides* since it is too fragmentary for the present analysis. While Burridge includes only one of Plutarch's *Lives* (*Cato Minor*), I have added two more (*Antony*, *Pompey*). Still more could be added, but the same tendency is found throughout Plutarch's other biographies.

³⁹ Most word counts for the book lengths can be found electronically through the *Thesaurus linguae Graecae* and Perseus Catalogue. In other cases, I have counted the words using the most current editions in the Loeb series. Word counts from speeches are my own.

⁴⁰ Initially, Lucian's *Passing of Peregrinus* may seem like a counter-example since it contains a speech (by an unnamed speaker) that is roughly half the length of the work. However, the speech itself functions as part of the narrative which drives the account forward. Part of the reason why the work is structured in this way is that Lucian seems to depart purposefully from certain biographical conventions. On this point, see J. König, 'The Cynic and Christian Lives of Lucian's Peregrinus', *The Limits of Ancient Biography* (ed. B. McGing and J. Mossman; Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2006) 227–53. Consequently, my analysis includes only Lucian's *Alexander* and his *Demonax*. The latter in particular, Keener notes, can be considered a *bios* with much more confidence (Keener, *Christobiography*, 92).

Table 3. Speech Lengths in Ancient Biographies

Author and Work	Date	Length	Description of Speeches
Isocrates, <i>Evagoras</i>	4th cent. BCE	4,600	No speeches
Xenophon, <i>Agesilaus</i>	4th cent. BCE	7,400	Contains only short phrases. No longer than three sentences. ¹
Cornelius Nepos, <i>Atticus</i>	1st cent. BCE	3,500	Mostly short, pithy statements. Longest speech 81 words. ²
<i>Life of Aesop</i>	1st cent. BCE	17,000	Longest discourse close to end, approx. 320 words. ³
Philo, <i>Life of Moses</i>	1st cent. CE	31,400	Mostly short speeches, around 100–200 words. Longest speech 286 words. ⁴
Tacitus, <i>Agricola</i>	1st cent. CE	6,900	Speech by Calgacus 558 words, and speech by Agricola 301 words. ⁵
Josephus, <i>Life</i>	1st cent. CE	15,800	Longest speech 100 words. ⁶
Plutarch, <i>Lives (Antony)</i>	2nd cent. CE	18,000	Longest speech 134 words. ⁷
Plutarch, <i>Lives (Cato Minor)</i>	2nd cent. CE	16,700	Short speeches around 80 words. ⁸
Plutarch, <i>Lives (Pompey)</i>	2nd cent. CE	20,000	Mostly pithy statements. Longest speech 77 words. ⁹
Lucian, <i>Alexander</i>	2nd cent. CE	7,000	Mostly short oracles. Approximately 50 words or less. ¹⁰
Lucian, <i>Life of Demonax</i>	2nd cent. CE	3,000	Short, witty rejoinders. The longest approximately 50 words. ¹¹
Suetonius, <i>Lives of the Caesars (Julius)</i>	2nd cent. CE	9,800	Short speeches, only a few sentences long. ¹²
Suetonius, <i>Lives of the Caesars (Augustus)</i>	2nd cent. CE	13,900	Short speeches, only a few sentences long. ¹³
Porphyry, <i>Life of Plotinus</i>	3rd cent. CE	8,000	Three speeches between 200–300 words. ¹⁴
Philostratus, <i>Lives of the Sophists</i>	3rd cent. CE	29,000	Mostly short, witty responses. Longest speech 85 words. ¹⁵
Philostratus, <i>Life of Apollonius</i>	3rd cent. CE	87,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Majority of speeches (approximately 14) between 300–600 words. – Three speeches between 700–1200 words. – One speech 1,874 words. – Final transcript of apologetic ‘speech’ (written but never presented) 6,196 words.¹⁶

¹E.g. *Ages.* 5.5–6.²*Att.* 21.5.³*Vita* 134–9.⁴*Mos.* 1.322–7.⁵*Agr.* 30.1–32.4; 33.2–34.3.⁶*Vita* 256–8.⁷*Ant.* 84.2–4.⁸*Cat. Min.* 45.3–4; 61.2–3; 68.4–5.⁹*Pomp.* 74.3–4.¹⁰E.g. *Alex.* 50.¹¹*Dem.* 20.¹²E.g. *Jul.* 66.2–3.¹³E.g. *Aug.* 28.2.¹⁴*Plot.* 17.15–40; 19.7–43; 22.13–63. The 691-word section at 20.18–105 is not a speech but a copy of the preface of a different work.¹⁵*Vit. soph.* 1.517.¹⁶Examples of typical speech length: *Vit. Apoll.* 1.1.1–3, 7.1–3; 4.38.1–5; 5.33.1–5; 6.10.4–6. Speeches between 700 and 1,200 words: 2.29.2–32.2; 5.14.2–17.1; 7.14.1–11. 1,874-word speech: 6.11.2–20. Final apologetic speech: 8.7.1–50.

longer, somewhere between 300 and 600 words. Against this backdrop, we can observe that Matthew's two longest discourses – roughly 2,000 and 1,500 words each – do not fit the general mould. If the above classical works are representative of Greco-Roman *bioi*, then ancient audiences who were accustomed to hearing/reading works like them would have noted the uncharacteristically long, flowing nature of Matthew's speeches. We need not suggest that Matthew's style would have been met with disdain or adversity; it would simply have been unusual – something unanticipated by audiences.

An analogy might be helpful. Those who enjoy Broadway musicals may be familiar with some of the following: *Les Misérables* (1980), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), *Rent* (1996), *The Lion King* (1997) and *Wicked* (2003). While these productions fall under the same broad genre, they also show great topical diversity. The subject matters range from struggling peasants during the French Revolution, to competing witches in the land of Oz, to singing animals on the Serengeti. The length of the songs within them vary: while a handful last between 1 and 2 minutes, the majority run around 3–4 minutes. In the *Phantom of the Opera*, there are a couple of longer pieces lasting ten and eleven minutes – one of which is the concluding piece. Those with a palate for musicals unconsciously carry such expectations as they enter the theatre: songs will generally be shorter. If they go beyond nine or ten minutes, the audience will notice, and they may look for a reason to justify the length.

Our passages in Matthew are analogous to unusually lengthy songs in contemporary musicals. It is not that they are necessarily objectionable or inconvenient: they are just out of the ordinary. Suppose there is a musical that contains a few songs that are untypically prolonged. And let us say a new composer decides to create her own revised version of the musical. It would be entirely understandable for the composer to design her version in a way that accords with more 'normal' musical standards. She may do so by shortening the songs, dividing up segments of a piece, casting the segments in different parts, organising the themes differently, and so forth. In fact, this is what happened with the musical *Chess*.⁴¹ A similar phenomenon may be taking place as Luke trims and reorganises Matthew's discourses. Thus, from Matthew's 2,000- and 1,500-word speeches, we get Luke's which have 384 words, 442 words, 486 words, 569 words and 778 words.⁴²

At this point, one might question whether the last example in the chart, Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*, constitutes a significant obstacle in the present argument. The majority of the speeches in it (at least fourteen) consist of between 300 and 600 words, three of them range between 700 and 1,200 and one consists of approximately 1,900 words. The final 'speech' (which is rather a transcription of Apollonius' defence that is never presented) nears the 6,000-word mark. Before concluding too much from this single work, however, we should keep a couple points in mind.

First, while Burridge includes the *Life of Apollonius* in his study on biographies, he and others acknowledge that there are significant problems with regarding it as a Greco-Roman *bios* at all.⁴³ Ewen Lyall Bowie maintains that despite the work's title, *Vita Apollonii*, it is not a *Vita* in the proper sense.⁴⁴ Part of the problem is precisely its size. Medium-length *bioi* generally fall within the 5,000 to 25,000-word range 'at the very extremes',⁴⁵ and the *Life of Apollonius* contains an astounding 87,000 words. In fact, its length more closely corresponds to that of a philosophical treatise or a historical

⁴¹ The original 1984 album contained lengthier songs which were later shortened and rearranged for the 1986 stage version of the musical. Thanks to Mark Goodacre for pointing me to this.

⁴² See above for references.

⁴³ Burridge, *Gospels*, 156, 165.

⁴⁴ E. L. Bowie, 'Apollonius of Tyana: Tradition and Reality', *Teilband Religion (Heidentum: Römische Religion, Allgemeines)* (ed. W. Haase; ANRW II.16.2; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978) 1652–85, at 1652.

⁴⁵ Burridge, *Gospels*, 164–5.

work.⁴⁶ But, second, even if we do think that the *Life Apollonius* is an ancient *bios*, we may be able to explain its long speeches in terms of its overall length. At 87,000 words, the work is nearly five times longer than Matthew's Gospel. It is not far-fetched to suppose that Philostratus (and others) considered his longer speeches acceptable in light of the enormity of the work itself. And even so, it is astonishing that the longest speeches (excepting the final apologetic transcript), which range from 700 to 1,900 words, are still shorter than Matthew's first major discourse. It seems that the best inference is this: if we consider the *Life of Apollonius* to be an ancient biographical work, it represents an end of a spectrum – and therefore it should not be considered a core representative of the rhetorical or literary features of other ancient *bioi* such as the others represented on the chart.

Another way of underscoring the present point is to look at authors who composed works of different genres. An adequate undertaking of such a project would fall beyond the scope of this project, but I will briefly comment on Josephus. As Table 3 indicates, Josephus' first-century (auto)biography is roughly 16,000 words long, and its longest speech is a hundred words. In this respect, it resembles Plutarch's *Cato Minor*. When, however, we compare his *Life* to his other historical works, *Jewish War* and *Antiquities*, we discover that the speeches in the historical genre are longer – many times over. Of the two works, *Jewish War* contains direct discourses that exhibit a higher level of rhetorical sophistication, while the *Antiquities'* speeches are less frequent and more casual.⁴⁷ In *Jewish War*, the length of the speeches of Agrippa, Eleazar and Josephus is 2,157, 1,338 and 1,297 words respectively.⁴⁸ And in *Jewish Antiquities*, the fourth longest speeches range between 700 and 900 words.⁴⁹ Now, as historical monographs, the two works are much longer than Josephus' autobiography. But this is precisely the point: shorter speeches are rhetorically more fitting to biographies. That is why Josephus includes short, pithy statements in his *Life*, but he is at complete liberty to make the speeches in his historical works more than twenty times longer: the longer discourses are fitting to the genre. A comparison with the Gospels is telling: Matthew's 2,000-word and 1,500-word speeches are more akin to those in Josephus' *Jewish War* and his *Jewish Antiquities*. Recognising this, an author such as Luke might consider his modifications entirely appropriate.

5. Counter-examples from Acts?

So far, our discussion has emphasised that attentiveness to genre and word counts is consequential for understanding the Gospels' speech lengths. As a final point, I will consider a potential response to the above argument. As we saw, advocates of the FH often maintain that Luke has abbreviated and rearranged parts of his Matthean source because he prefers shorter discourses.⁵⁰ One potential objection is to point out that Luke seems to include

⁴⁶ Burridge, *Gospels*, 165. Compare with Plato's *Republic* at 90,000 words and Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* at 80,000 words. In this vein, the Philostratus specialist Graham Anderson notes, 'It is futile in the end to try to "explain" *Apollonius* in terms of any single genre.' Anderson nevertheless seems somewhat more accepting of the label 'sophistic biography'. G. Anderson, *Philostratus: Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century AD* (new edn; Routledge Revivals; New York: Routledge, 2014) 235.

⁴⁷ See P. V. I. Varneda, *The Historical Method of Flavius Josephus* (Arbeiten zur Literatur und Geschichte des Hellenistischen Judentums xix; Leiden: Brill, 1986) 92.

⁴⁸ Josephus, *J.W.* 2.345–401; 5.376–420; 7.341–88. The last of these is in fact the second of a two-part speech. If we include the first part, the total word count becomes 1,676.

⁴⁹ Josephus, *Ant.* 2.140–59; 4.177–93; 15.127–46; 19.167–84.

⁵⁰ So Goulder asserts that Luke 'tends to favor short speeches' (Goulder, *Luke*, 39). 'He does not like long units' (*Luke*, 346).

longer speeches in Acts. Christopher Tuckett, for instance, draws attention to Peter's Pentecost speech, Stephen's 52-verse discourse in Acts 7 and the story of Cornelius' conversion in Acts 10.⁵¹ In light of these (alleged) counter-examples, he concludes that the 'appeal to Luke's desire for brevity thus seems unconvincing'.⁵² The assumption implicit in the argument is clear: if Luke employs longer speeches in Acts, then it is unlikely that he had a concern for brevity in his Gospel. This supposition, however, is questionable on two counts.⁵³

First, it overlooks differences in genre. Most scholars regard Acts not as a *bios* proper but as a work of ancient historiography.⁵⁴ This difference, of course, in no way subverts the unity of Luke-Acts: after all, authors were entirely capable of writing works of different genres (e.g. Josephus), and the borders between genres could be blurred. However, one of the distinctive features that set *bioi* proper apart from ancient historiographical works was that the former typically focused on a single protagonist while the latter could follow various characters.⁵⁵ So, on the one hand, we should observe that Stephen's speech, the longest discourse in Acts, has 999 words and is longer than any speech in Luke. On the other hand, since Acts itself is not a *bios*, one should avoid imposing the expectations of the Gospel's speech lengths onto it. Moreover, the presence of multiple characters in Acts provides a partial contextual reason for the length of Stephen's discourse: he has barely been introduced in chapter 6, and readers must go from ignorance to understanding his martyrdom – a task not easily accomplished in a short (e.g. 400–500-word) speech.⁵⁶

Second, it is helpful to examine the lengths of other discourses in Acts before drawing any overarching conclusions. The alleged counter-examples in Acts are not as impressive as Tuckett supposes. The five longest speeches have the following lengths: 361 words (Paul's address to the Jerusalem crowd), 422 words (his defence before Agrippa), 425 words (his speech in Pisidia), 431 words (Peter's Pentecost discourse) and 999 words (Stephen's oration).⁵⁷ The first four are in fact shorter than most of the Lukan discourses.⁵⁸ Stephen's speech is, of course, longer than the rest, but its significance should not be overestimated due to the considerations discussed above.

In sum, the counter-argument from the longer speeches in Acts carries less weight than often assumed. An attentiveness to word counts reveals that most of the speeches are no longer than those found in Luke, and Stephen's speech is easily explained contextually and in terms of differences in genre.

6. Conclusion

The argument I have advanced is part of a cumulative reply to the following objection: it is impossible, unthinkable or unlikely that Luke would have reduced Matthew's long

⁵¹ C. M. Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity: Studies on Q* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996) 27.

⁵² Tuckett, *Q*, 27. We might note that Peter's interjection in verse 41 constitutes a change in subject, but we will ignore this.

⁵³ For a different response to Tuckett's argument, see Goodacre, *Case Against Q*, 94–6.

⁵⁴ For extensive argumentation, see C. S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary. Introduction and 1:1–2:47* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012) 51–89; Keener, *Christobiography*, 222.

⁵⁵ Keener, *Acts*, 57; C. W. Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: University of California Press, 1988) 34–6.

⁵⁶ Thanks to Mark Goodacre from drawing my attention to this point.

⁵⁷ Acts 22.3–21; 26.2–23; 13.16–41; 2.14–26; 7.2–53, respectively. It is also odd that Tuckett appeals to the story of Cornelius' conversion since its longest speech is relatively short at 181 words.

⁵⁸ Compare them with Luke 21.8–36 (442 words); 17.20–8.14 (486 words); 6.20–49 (569 words); and 15.4–16.13 (778 words).

discourses in the way Farrer envisioned. My reply is that Luke had a literary/rhetorical reason for doing so. As the above analysis suggests, the usual expectation for Greco-Roman *bioi* was for speeches to be relatively short – at least shorter than what we find in a medium-length work such as Matthew. To put the conclusion of the article more generally, we may say that debates about the Synoptic problem might be advanced (i) by the appreciation of the Gospels as *bioi*, and (ii) by the careful comparison with works of the same genre, especially with respect to word counts.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Special thanks to Mark Goodacre, Caleb Friedeman, Mark Jeong, Vince Archer and an anonymous reviewer for valuable feedback on this article. I am grateful, in addition, to members of the Duke NT graduate student colloquium who supplied many helpful comments.

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