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'Fake News, Hypocrites!'

The Rhetoric of Blame from Jesus to Trump

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The Rhetoric of Blame from Jesus to Trump

1. Introduction and Aims

Blame—*vituperatio*—is as old a rhetorical practice as rhetoric itself, noted already by Aristotle. The practice of blaming one's adversaries or portraying them in an unfavourable light is used in polemical speeches and texts from back then until today.

I present a modest exploratory study of *vituperatio* from classical handbooks of rhetoric to the New Testament, and onwards to our times. During work on this text, *The New York Times* published a list of President Donald J. Trump's *Twitter* insults.¹ What better an example of a rhetorically influential "saviour" in our time to give contemporary material for a comparison of *vituperatio* then and now?²

My aim is twofold: first, to describe *vituperatio* and, second, to discuss its ethics and function. After a summary of the place of *vituperatio* in classical rhetoric, I pose the following questions: (1) How are the types of *vituperatio* in the classical rhetorical tradition used by Jesus, Paul, and President Trump, respectively? (2) Are the prerequisites for *vituperatio* as a rhetorical strategy different then and now?

These questions are answered from the perspective of *genus demonstrativum* and the *progymnasmata* tradition, on the one hand, and a few

select texts, on the other: The Gospel of Matthew, Paul's Letter to the Romans, Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul's Letter to the Galatians, and President Trump's *Twitter* insults. In my analysis, I follow this order. The NT texts include a Gospel and three central letters.³ The contemporary material is conspicuously narrow, but uniquely influential, and within the discipline of Rhetoric, presidential rhetoric is a staple. A broader selection would give more indicative results, but for my aims it is sufficient to give select examples of how this rhetorical device is used.

2. *Vituperatio* in Classical Rhetoric

2.1 *Vituperatio* and *Genus Demonstrativum*

Within classical rhetoric, *vituperatio* is foremost the *officium* of *genus demonstrativum*. Blame (ψόγος, Aristotle, *Rhet.* I.ii.3; *vituperatio*, *Rhet. Her.* I.ii.2, Quintilian, *Inst.* I.vii.1; Lausberg §62, 3b) corresponds dialectically to praise (ἔπαινος, *laus*) and entails assessing something or someone as bad (αἰσχρόν, *turpe*, Lausberg §§61, 240). Due to the fundamental influence of Aristotle's division of speeches (*genera causarum*) into forensic (*genus iudiciale*), deliberative (*genus deliberativum*), and epideictic (*genus demonstrativum*), *vituperatio* is foremost connected with epideictic speeches.

Quintilian instructs in the proper way of praise or blame (*Inst.* III.vii.). For topics of person, this is done through remarks about: preceding his⁴ birth, his country, his parents, his ancestors, as well as omens and prophecies foretelling future greatness. The individual is then praised "for his character, his physical endowments, and external circumstances" (*Inst.* III.vii.12). Among the external circumstances, wealth, power, and influence are "the surest test of character for good or evil; they make us better or they make us worse" (*Inst.* III.vii.14). Regarding blame,

³ Revelations is a rich source for *vituperatio*, but I decided not to include an apocalyptic text since the vilification therein is significantly different.

⁴ The personal nouns here follow the sources, but certainly all people, irrespective of gender, can be equally praised or vilified.

¹ Quealy 2021.

² President Trump has indeed been hailed a saviour for conservative groups in the United States. Gabbatt, 11 Jan. 2020; *BBC News*, 21 July, 2017.

Quintilian notes that, “[t]he same method will be applied to denunciations as well, but with a view to opposite effects” (*Inst.* III.vii.19).

Quintilian’s treatment is based on the assumption that the hearers have a common understanding of vice and virtue, and he points out Aristotle’s focus on the audience’s character and ἐνδοξία, that which is held to be true by the audience (*Inst.* III.vii.23). The speaker must know what the audience will accept as virtue or vice if he wants them to accept a description of a person’s character.

We need also remember the dialectic of honour and shame in the ancient Mediterranean culture.⁵ Part of the effect of *vituperatio* stems from its ability to shame the recipient. Against the background of a pursuit of honour, shaming has a stronger effect within social groups built around common values.

Regarding people—the second group that can be praised or blamed, alongside gods, animals and other (*Inst.* III.vii.6)—Lausberg (§245) has collected aspects of praise and blame in a table (in Latin), based on a synthesis of classical works, which I here present shortened, adjusted, and in English (my translation). I have left out praise and, where needed, reversed virtues to vices (for example, “strength” to “weakness”). Table 1, then, shows the topical framing of blame within classical rhetoric.

Table 1. To Blame Men.

- I) Concerning the time before his birth, especially:
- A) lineage (country, ancestors, parents), to blame them
 - a) with regard to different kinds of turpitude (shame, disgrace, ugliness)
 - b) with regard to what is known about his vices and other things to make him more disliked
 - B) omens, oracles
- II) concerning his lifetime, especially:
- A) concerning the mind, regarding vices, looking at deeds
 - a) blame according to age: α) in the early years (infancy): lack of character; β) in childhood: lack of discipline; γ) in other ages: prevalent bad deeds
 - b) to divide blame after examples of vices: α) weakness; β) unrighteousness; γ) lack of self-control; δ) other vices
 - c) enumerating actions of an individual: α) one of the last; β) below hope or expectation; γ) only as a cause of something; δ) if he is a holy Christian: enumerate sins committed

⁵ See, for example, Moxnes 1993.

- d) argue blame in either trial of humans or God
- B) of the body, especially:
 - 1) with regard to ugliness: describe and enumerate individual members
 - 2) with regard to weakness
- C) external wealth (“fortune”) and the improper use of it
- III) from after his life, especially:
 - A) from the judgement of posterity; B) from captivity; C) from ugly descendants.

2.2 Vituperatio as a Progymnasma

In addition to the Aristotelian genera, *vituperatio* is included in the influential form of rhetorical exercises for youth, the fourteen προγυμνάσματα or preliminary exercises (Lat. *praeexercitamina*). For two millennia, composing invectives was a standard exercise for students of rhetoric and the art of *vituperatio* or ψόγος well-known since the time of Aristotle up until around 1800.⁶ These exercises are still practiced at some schools and universities today (at Lund, the *progymnasmata* constitute the baseline for practical writing and speaking exercises in the discipline of Rhetoric).⁷

Quintilian (*Inst.* II.iv.20–21) also describes the *progymnasma* of *vituperatio*. His ethical perspective on rhetoric compels him to explain why young people should learn to denounce the wicked: “The mind is exercised by the variety and multiplicity of the subject matter, while the character is moulded by the contemplation of virtue and vice.”

In Aphthonius’ handbook, *vituperatio* follows the *encomium* as the ninth exercise.⁸ He gives detailed instructions for the composition of *vituperatio*, which I present in table 2, below.⁹ Aphthonius’ list is more focused, but in the same tradition as the more general overview in table 1.

⁶ Students were asked to compose texts with increasing difficulty, often memorizing and performing them in class. The *progymnasmata* are first mentioned in the *Rhetoric to Alexander*, late 4th century BC. Lausberg §§1092–50, Kennedy 1999, 26–28.

⁷ The set-up at Lund follows Eriksson 2017.

⁸ Aphthonius’ handbook is the most influential and his collection and order of fourteen *progymnasmata* the one most often referred to. Kennedy 1999. For an English translation, see Kennedy 2003.

⁹ The table is from “vituperatio. psogos.” *Silva Rhetoricae*, which is without references, but is a synthesis of Aphthonius’ *encomion* and *invective*.

Table 2. Directions based on Aphthonius for the composition of a *vituperatio*. Attack a person or thing for being vicious. After composing an *exordium*, follow these steps.

1. Describe the stock a person comes from
 - what people, what country, what ancestors, what parents.
2. Describe the person's upbringing
 - education, instruction in art, training in laws.
3. Describe the person's deeds, which should be described as the results of
 - his evils of mind (such as weakness or indiscretion),
 - his evils of body (such as plainness, lethargy, or lack of vigour),
 - his evils of fortune (as lack of or corruption of high position, power, wealth, friends).
4. Make a disfavourable comparison to someone else to escalate your vituperation.
5. Conclude with an epilogue including either an exhortation to your hearers not to emulate this person, or a prayer.

There are many extant vituperations from antiquity, such as Cicero's invectives against Antony, and Demosthenes' against Philip of Macedon. Closer in character to our material, Johnson provides examples of *vituperatio* typical of rivalry between public preachers, such as between sophists and philosophers. Dion of Prusa (Dio Chrysostom), a first century sophist turned philosopher, calls the *sophistai*: "ignorant, boastful, self-deceived" (*Or.* 4.33), "liars and deceivers" (12.12), preaching for the sake of gain and glory and only their own benefit (32.30). Furthermore, they are flatterers (23.11), mindless (54.1), boastful and shameless (55.7). The second century rhetorician Aelius Aristides returns the criticism. About the philosophers, he says, "they despise others while being themselves worthy of scorn. [...] They make a great show of virtue and never practice it" (307.6). He says they have the outward appearance of virtue but are inwardly corrupt (307.10).¹⁰

In antiquity, the conscientious student of rhetoric would be well prepared for *vituperatio*, both through *progymnasmata* and *genus demonstrativum*, which he would have written and presented. Rhetoric was part of both Greek and Roman education, and rhetorical practices were widely known through the many speeches held on numerous occasions.

¹⁰ Johnson 1989, 430–31, with more examples. He refers to the second of Aristides' *Platonic Discourses* (references are to paragraph and line in HYTIEP TON TETTAPON).

Here, I have limited myself to an overview of classical sources. The "Rhetoric of Insult" evolves throughout history, taking on different topics during different times, but retaining its central features.¹¹

3. Method and Procedure

Thirty years ago, Andrie du Toit identified nine vilifying trends in early Christian letters, which I use as the starting-point: (1) hypocrisy and falseness; (2) obscure, shadowy characters; (3) sorcery; (4) inflated self-esteem; (5) moral depravity; (6) a perversive influence; (7) associated with dubious characters; (8) prone to judgement; and (9) ludicrous characters.¹²

Through a careful reading, I have identified all vituperations in the chosen NT material. As regards the Trumpian material, *NYT* has made the selection, resulting in a list of 311 pages.¹³ I analyse this material in a similar way as the NT material, but without listing all instances.

During the analysis, it turned out that three categories were less common than others. Therefore, I forego a presentation of the category of "sorcery," for which I only found two instances in my NT material, Matt 12:24 and Gal 3:1, and no instance in Trump's tweets. Similarly, I skip the category "associated with dubious characters," for which I found no instance in my NT material. Trump only provides a few examples of this type (such as a remark that Bernie Sanders is a "Castro lover").

Also, I forego the category "prone to judgement." In Matthew, we find general condemnations of the wicked (such as 13:49 that the angels will "separate the wicked from the righteous"), but the only clear instances in my material are Gal 1:8–9 and 6:9, both with the anathema "let them be under God's curse!" There are only a few borderline instances of this type in Trump's tweets (California and Portland, respectively "is going to hell").

¹¹ See Conley 2010.

¹² Du Toit 1994, 405–10. The article was first presented at the 1992 SNTS congress.

¹³ Quealy (19 Jan. 2020) lists all insults and provides contextual information as well as the tweets. I have not found it necessary to verify that Quealy's compilation includes all forms of Trumpian *vituperatio*. Should there be any omissions, that is neither here nor there. Trump was banned from Twitter on January 8, 2021.

On the other hand, not all vilificatory passages fit in with Du Toit's categories. Even only for the letters, I found an additional category to be necessary: the inability to understand what is right.

I have limited my survey to (1) persons, and (2) *vituperatio* with a fairly clear addressee. Outside of this scope falls blame where the goal is to influence the general attitude of the receivers, for example through warnings such as "watch out for false prophets" (Matt 7:15; 24:11; all NT quotations are from NIV).

In the following, then, I go through six of Du Toit's nine categories, supplemented with a new one, and present the harvest, as it were, of the sources. Then, in the second part of this study, I discuss the ethics and function of *vituperatio*.

4. Results: *Vituperatio* in the New Testament and in President Trump's Tweets

4.1 Hypocrisy and Falseness

The first instance in our material is found in Matt 3:7–8, where John the Baptist positions himself as a prophet against insincere religious practices: "when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.'"

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus picks up on John's critique (Matt 6:1–2): "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. [...] [W]hen you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others."

This line of narrative, hypocrites on the one hand and true believers on the other, continues as a thread throughout Matthew.¹⁴ The words against the teachers of the law and the Pharisees are harsh, as in Matt

¹⁴ Freyne (1985, 142) presents a list with "Apocalyptic Denunciation of Opponents in Matthew." Some I have identified as *vituperatio*, others as more indirect "denunciation," for example Matt 23:38; 24:2.

23:27–28: "You are like whitewashed tombs, [...] on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." I note the striking similarity with Aelius' *vituperatio*—this was typical rhetoric of the time. Other vituperations in Matthew are 6:5, 7–8, 16; 15:7–8; 23:13, 16–17, 18–20, 23–24, 25–26, 29–32, 33–35a.

Continuing to Paul, the following passage falls under the heading of hypocrisy and falseness: Rom 2:21–24 ("you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?") and Gal 2:12–13, where Paul blames Peter for withdrawing from eating with the Gentiles. According to Paul, "[t]he other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy."

With President Trump, the ψευδ-vituperation returns in force for our time. For him, "Fake News" signifies one-sided, fraudulent, or conspiratory reporting. Trump also uses "fake" as a prefix for many other things, such as "fake voters," "fake election results," etc. In President Trump's blaming tweets, the word fake is used 1,037 times, mostly in the phrase "fake news" (108 times). Trump also uses the ὑπόκρισις-vituperation, hypocrite/s (16 times)—the only direct overlap with the NT material. The Democrats are labelled "Phony hypocrites!," Macy's department store "terrible hypocrites," senator Ted Cruz "the ultimate hypocrite," and the mainstream media, "Fake News, Hypocrites!"

Trump favours the epithet "bad" (377 times). His former lawyer is characterized as a "[b]ad lawyer and fraudster" and the former FBI-director James Comey as a "bad cop."

Related to falseness, we find "phony" (145 times). Senator Elisabeth Warren is a "fraud" (in addition to being "phony"), another, Claire McCaskill is "so phony," and Richard Blumenthal a "Total Phony!" Mainstream media is not only "fake," it is also "phony," and "dishonest." Related to falseness, we have "fraud" and "fraudulent" (135 times). Mainstream media is "fraudulent," Hillary Clinton a "[f]raud" as well as "totally dishonest!" "Dishonest/ly" is another favourite epithet with Trump, used 176 times, especially regarding mainstream media (*CNN*, *The New York Times* et al.), and named reporters and journalists; also, the Republican establishment is "[d]ishonest."

Finally, we have "corrupt" and "corruption," used 292 times for congressmen, senators, etc. The Speaker of the House is referred to as the

"corrupt Nervous Nancy Pelosi," mainstream media is "corrupt" and even the Justice Department is described as "a broken and corrupt machine."

4.2 Obscure, Shadowy Characters

Under this heading, Du Toit mentions several passages that centre around the vague *τινες* ("some") through which one avoids being clear about exactly who is meant, in order not to give them exposure.¹⁵ In Rom 3:8, Paul condemns people slandering him: "Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—'Let us do evil that good may result?' Their condemnation is just!" In Gal 1:7, the members of the congregations founded by Paul are under a harmful influence: "Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ." Additionally, under this heading, we have Gal 2:4, 12 and 1 Cor 4:18.

I am unsure about Du Toit's classification of Gal 2:12. When Paul is indicating that "certain men" had a bad influence on Peter, I do not see a focus on these men, but on Peter. The "shadowy characters," *τινες*, are not blamed, but Peter is blamed, because of hypocrisy. The *τινες* are here a "perversive influence," but the actual *vituperatio* seems to belong under the heading of "hypocrisy and falseness." That all of three categories can be discussed for Gal 2:12, shows the difficulty to create a clear taxonomy: some of the categories blend into each other and the choice of the analytic depends on how the context is interpreted.

Among Trump's vilifications, I have not found references to shadowy characters in this sense. The pejorative use of "some" is used a few times, for instance, about *Politico*, a news organisation, "some very untalented reporters," and about members of Robert Mueller's team, "some very bad, conflicted & corrupt people."

4.3 Inflated Self-Esteem

Jesus's admonition regarding inflated self-esteem is directed against the Pharisees. In Matt 23:5–7, "[e]verything they do is done for people to see [...] they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues." The "seven woes," which follow (verses 13–39), mainly fall under hypocrisy due to this word being used but can partly be placed under the heading of inflated self-esteem or moral depravity, such as verses 23–24: "you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness [...] You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel."

In the vice-list in Rom 1:29–30, Paul criticizes an undefined group: "They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents."

Talk of boasting is common in Paul's letters. Du Toit (1994, 408) notes that the "*καύχησις*-label was [...] a quite popular denigrating device." I find this label in Rom 2:17, 23 and Gal 6:13. The charge of blasphemy is related to wrongful boasting, and present in Rom 3:8 and in 1 Cor 10:30. In 1 Cor 4:18–6:12 Paul's overall strategy is to diminish the recipients' alleged boasting by shaming them; see for example 5:2 ("you are proud!") and 5:6 ("[y]our boasting is not good").

This type of blame does not seem to appear directly in Trump's tweets. I find only two instances, where he blames someone for being "arrogant." Perhaps for him, an inflated self-esteem is not typically a reason for blame.

4.4 Moral Depravity

Turning first to Matt 12:34, Jesus is harsh regarding the morality of the Pharisees and Sadducees: "You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of." Similarly, Matt 23:3, "But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." Additionally, Matt 16:6, 21:13, and 31–32. Certainly, these passages describe hypocrisy also, as well as moral depravity.

¹⁵ Du Toit 1994, 406.

Paul's comments are of a different nature. Both under this and other headings, we on the one hand find lists of vices, and, on the other, specific passages about certain people. I quoted a passage of the former type as "inflated self-esteem," Rom 1:29–32. This passage does not seem to be directly related to any specific ongoing problems. The purpose is to mark the line between righteous and unrighteous people generally.

The passage 1 Cor 5:9–11 offers a similar list of vices. 1 Cor 6:7–11 is related to ongoing problems, but the purpose is the same: to make it clear that a Christian life needs to be characterized by righteous living: "you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters. Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?" Also, Gal 6:12 belongs to this category: "Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ." Also, 1 Cor 11:17 belongs here.

Trump sometimes attacks the morality of those he opposes. The Democrats are described as "badly defeated & demoralized," "moral cowardice," and *NBC News* is accused of "highly unethical conduct." Christopher Steele is "A sick liar. [*sic*]" Generally, though, ethics and morals are uncommon among Trump's vituperations.

4.5 A Perverse Influence

Jesus does not mince words when attacking the Pharisees at the end of Matthew (23:15): "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are."

In Romans, Paul uses a similar tactic. Du Toit places Rom 16:17–18 under the heading of moral depravity, but several passages lend themselves to more than one category. Here, I find perverse influence to be the gist: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. [...] By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people."

In 1 Cor 5, Paul singles out a supposedly immoral person whose influence will corrupt the whole community. Also, Gal 1:6–9 belongs to this category.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. [...] [L]et them be under God's curse!

Other passages are Gal 4:17, and 5:7b–12, "That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. 'A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.'"

This category is not as clear as the others: Are not shadowy characters and moral depravity also a perverse influence?

It is difficult to find the same type of language in Trump's tweets as in Galatians, for instance, but perhaps some institutions and persons labelled as "bad" can be included here. On some level, there is a parallel, also, between Trump's "Fake news, hypocrites!" and Paul's talk of a "fake" gospel.

4.6 Ludicrous Characters

Comic elements in biblical passages are difficult to classify. In Matthew, I find only two. In the first, 15:14, Jesus vilifies the Pharisees as ridiculous: "Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." Near the end, passers-by ridicule Jesus hanging on the cross (27:39–42): "'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel!'"

In Paul's material, commentators sometimes consider Gal 5:12 a joke, also.

Moving on to Trump, here he is almost nuanced in his variation. People he does not like, are often described as "crooked" (501 times). There is a ludicrous aspect to such descriptions, when applied to persons holding respected offices or otherwise enjoying good standing in society. There is a parallel to Jesus's portrayal of the Pharisees. Hillary Clinton is

“crooked Hillary,” and others are also given this epithet. “Phony” (145 times) also partly lies within the ludicrous.

For making persons seem ludicrous, Trump also uses “wacko” (13 times), “irrelevant” (10 times), and “weak” (141 times). Forty-three times someone or something is characterized as “a joke” or “a total joke.” About U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal, Trump tweets, “cried like a baby and begged for forgiveness,” presenting him as spineless and ludicrous, whereas senator Elizabeth Warren is described as “a very nervous and skinny version of Pocahontas (1/1024th)” or even “Pocahontas (the bad version),” referring to her claim to native American heritage; and the republican 2020 challengers to Trump are described as the “Three Stooges.”

Another manner of invoking ridicule is Trump’s use of “sad” (73 times). Both people, institutions, Democrats and Republicans, allegations, and processes, are repeatedly labelled “sad.”

The president’s *argumenta ad homines* sometimes end up coarse. Peggy Noonan (columnist, *The Wall Street Journal*): “doesn’t have a clue, and hasn’t for many years,” the speaker of the house, Nancy Pelosi: “Nancy’s teeth were falling out of her mouth,” William F. Weld: “a man who couldn’t stand up straight while receiving an award,” Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: “a Wack Job.”

Standing epithets are a favourite with Trump.¹⁶ We have “Crazy Bernie,” “Crying Chuck,” “Senator Joe Munchkin” [correct name Manchin], “Mini Mike,” “Shifty Schiff,” “Crooked Hillary,” “Nervous Nancy,” “Sleepy Joe”—then presidential candidate Joe Biden—and many others.

4.7 Foolishness—Inability to Understand What Is Right

This category may seem so basic that it is subsumed into the other ones, but there are passages that are blaming without fitting into any of Du Toit’s nine categories, as the following passages illustrate (Rom 10:21; perhaps, also Rom 11:9–10): “All day long I have held out my hands to

a disobedient and obstinate people.” A more concrete passages is 1 Cor 14:23: “So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?” 1 Cor 6:1–6 deals with another concrete situation: “do you not know that the Lord’s people will judge the world? [...] [I]f you have disputes [...], do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church? I say this to shame you.”

In these passages, the problem is not about hypocrisy or falseness or moral depravity—the two categories that come closest, but about an inability to understand, foolishness if you will. Compare also Gal 1:6–10, categorized under perverse influence, which can be placed here, also.

President Trump exhibits many instances of this type. “Fool/s,” “foolish/ly,” and “foolishness” occur 55 times. For instance, U.S. Trade Representatives are “foolish, or incompetent, people.”

Based on the word “understand,” (18 times), the Secretary of Housing and Urban development, Ben Carson, is “incapable of understanding foreign policy,” and regarding U.S. Senator Joe Manchin: “All he had to do is read the Transcripts, sadly, which he wouldn’t understand anyway.”

Invectives based on “stupid” belong here (46 times): former National Security adviser John Bolton is “so stupid,” Joe Biden is “so mortifyingly stupid,” and many persons or organisations show “Incredible stupidity!” Of the Governor of Georgia, Brian Kemp: “Nobody can be this stupid.”

“Dumb/er/est”—a companion to stupid—is frequently used (118 times). *CNN* anchor Don Lemon is “the ‘dumbest man on television,’” U.S. Senator Mitt Romney is “one of the dumbest and worst candidates in the history of Republican politics,” the U.S. immigration policies are “the DUMBEST & WORST immigration laws anywhere in the world!,” they are “INSANE,” introducing another related word (used 10 times).

Several other words relate to the inability to understand, such as “incapable” (7 times), “get it” (12 times)—former Florida Governor “just doesn’t get it”—and “lost,” which in some cases signifies an inability to understand: “Fox is lost!!!,” the Democrats are “totally lost they are Clowns!,” and Joe Biden “got lost in a ‘mental fog.’”

¹⁶ A list is also compiled on “List of nicknames used by Donald Trump,” *Wikipedia*.

Trump's big favourite under this heading is "crazy" (166 times). Most things or persons he does not like are either "crazy" or "going crazy," many times in capital letters.

5. *Vituperatio* as a Rhetorical Strategy

5.1 Summary: Topics of Blame

Compared with blame in classical rhetorical handbooks (tables 1–2), my analysis leads me to present a modified list. First of all, I find no instance of blaming anyone regarding the time before birth or after death, and a person's upbringing is rarely mentioned.

Regarding the life of a person, Du Toit's categories can be seen as elaborations of several subpoints, confirming the contents of tables 1–2: many classical forms of *vituperatio* are present in the NT. For instance, "hypocrisy and falseness" expand on "unrighteousness." Similarly, the other categories of Du Toit fit into table 1. As for "the body," none of Du Toit's categories cover this category, but in the Trumpian material there are references to the body, which I in my analysis have placed under the category "ludicrous characters," but they warrant their own category. As for "fortune," I have above classified such references as "moral depravity," but I agree with the handbooks that it is a category of its own.

In my survey I found it useful to add a new category, "foolishness—inability to understand what is right."

Du Toit's categories are only meant to cover early Christian letters, but we have seen that they are represented in Gospel material as well. However, three categories were significantly less represented and therefore omitted: sorcery, association with dubious historical characters, and prone to judgement. As for "inflated self-esteem," it is unusual in the Trumpian material, but I include it in the list.

In summary, I present a list of nine timeless topics of blame for *vituperatio*, see table 3.

Table 3. Topics of blame. A resource-list for *vituperatio*.

1. Hypocrisy and falseness
2. Obscure, shadowy characters
3. Inflated self-esteem
4. Moral depravity
5. A perverse influence
6. Ludicrous characters
7. Foolishness—inability to understand what is right
8. Vices regarding fortune
9. Deficiencies related to the body

5.2 Discussion: The Ethics and Function of *Vituperatio*

Vituperatio is often a feature of polemic, one that does not require schooling—as most rhetorical practices follow the *ordo naturalis*.¹⁷ On this topic, Quintilian (VIII.vi.75–76) notes, in connection with *hyperbole*, that,

[h]yperbole is employed even by peasants and uneducated persons, for the good reason that everybody has an innate passion for exaggeration or attenuation of actual facts, and no one is ever contented with the simple truth. [...] [W]e are allowed to amplify, when the magnitude of the facts passes all words, and in such circumstances our language will be more effective if it goes beyond the truth than if it falls short of it.

How much are we "allowed to amplify"? The art of blaming has certain effects. In a more recent study, Du Toit defends Paul's language use because his objectives were just, Paul "was clearly convinced that severe language was called for in the critical situation in which the Galatian churches found themselves. Only in this way could he bring his erstwhile convertees to their senses."¹⁸

Analogously, should we say that President Trump's language use is justified by his goal, "to make America great again"? Does the goal relieve him of the fact that he violated the *decorum* of a democratically elected head of state in our time, with negative consequences as a result?

¹⁷ For the discussion on Paul's possible schooling in rhetoric, see Hietanen 2007, 29–34.

¹⁸ Du Toit 2014, 4.

Paul's language has through centuries been found to be harsh, but, on the whole, not necessarily a breach of the decorum of *his* time. Johnson, as one of many, makes the point that *vituperatio* during the first century AD was conventional: "The polemic signifies simply that these are opponents and such things should be said about them."¹⁹ In a study on "frank speech" (*παρρησία*), Sampley arrives at the same conclusion, that "Paul uses frank speech according to the conventions," and "adjusts or varies the harshness of frank speech according to his appraisal of the circumstances he addresses."²⁰

Paul's rhetoric is motivated by his need to establish the emerging Christian Church, and, on the whole, proportionate to his apostolic quest: to protect the development of a new movement that faced a real and immediate risk of derailing.

Of course, many of Trump's supporters see a similar immediate and fundamental risk of the derailing of the country, and would argue that severe language is called for. They could, also, refer to Quintilian (above): "we are allowed to amplify, when the magnitude of the facts passes all words."

Du Toit notes that "it would certainly be naïve to accept a one to one relationship between the description of the encoded adversaries in our documents and their real-life counterparts. An element of distortion must certainly be accepted."²¹ Here Thurén's call for *derhetorizing* is needed.²² The "element of distortion" needs to be taken for granted—it is a rhetorical strategy. To read Paul's descriptions of his adversaries at face value is as distorting as taking Trump's characterisations at face value. Regarding the latter, we can form our own opinions. Regarding Paul's adversaries, it is difficult. But how far can one go with slander? Du Toit makes the point that

it would undermine the *ethos* of a writer if he were perceived as untrustworthy. A disturbing discrepancy between *verba* and *res* would put the *sinceritas* of the

¹⁹ Johnson 1989, 441.

²⁰ Sampley 2004, 295.

²¹ Du Toit 1994, 411.

²² Thurén 2000.

author in jeopardy. Or to use the terminology of speech act analysis: it would undermine the Maxim of Quality.²³

As I have indicated, *vituperatio* has not changed that much over time, and is as much a part of the current rhetorical repertoire as it ever was. Even a U.S. president uses it more than the apostle Paul, and in a similar manner.

Looking at Trump's narrative more generally, there are other parallels with Paul (if read, for instance, against the background of Galatians). Humphrey has identified five themes that constitute Trump's story structure: (1) The true version of the United States is beset with invaders; (2) Real Americans can see this; (3) I (Trump) am uniquely qualified to stop this invasion; (4) The establishment and its agents are hindering me; and (5) The United States is in mortal danger because of this. Within this narrative framing, the use of *vituperatio* appears a natural strategy.

But there are also differences. Today, we cannot take for granted that any set of virtues are, in any wider meaning, accepted as fundamental societal values—a difference compared to the milieu of Paul or Quintilian, in the first century.

For Trump, *effect* seems to be more important than *sinceritas*. For him, it does not matter much if *res* and *verba* harmonize. The moment of the tweet—its kairotic effect—matters more than that the utterance withstands scrutiny. Du Toit's reference (from 1994, above) to Grice gives cause to reflect on a change in expectations about communication: we can no longer, in the 2020s, count on the Maxim of Quality being upheld even by those holding the highest offices.

One of the points worth making is that we never could. Neither Paul nor Trump followed general ethical ideals of language use—in an existential ideological conflict, very few do. Certainly, this is troublesome considering the importance of these two men. However, we all have the innate capacity of derhetorizing polemic communication. We do not take harsh words at face value. In many cases, "[t]he references to the opposition are not intended to characterize them otherwise than that they are

²³ Du Toit 1994, 411.

in fact opposition and should be strongly rejected.”²⁴ This remark about Paul holds equally well for Trump.

The ethical question is whether such a rhetorical device is ever acceptable. The plethora of research based on “Othering”, following Emmanuel Levinas’ 1948 theory, has highlighted the destructive effect of exclusion—often based on fear of the other.²⁵ Practices of othering are in full vigour in the current political landscape and the *vituperatio* of the NT is reproduced today within radical Christian movements, also.

In her analysis of *vituperatio* in Revelation, Collins notes that commentators find the harsh language against enemies to be inferior because, “[m]any Americans, especially those of the middle class, do not engage in or approve of verbal abuse or vituperation. When it occurs, it is viewed as a moral failure, a sign of immaturity, or a momentary loss of control.”²⁶ Considering the explosion of publicly available inferior language that social media exposes us to, her view seems dated. Today, breaches of decorum need to be substantial in order for people to react (except concerning politicised sensitive subjects, in the case of which even a small error may be detrimental). Even against current standards, President Trump repeatedly breached decorum and was at times criticised as much for his tweets as for his politics.

Vilificatio often violates truth—one of the original issues within rhetoric. Turning to Quintilian one final time (*Inst.* VIII.vi.74), discussing *hyperbole*, he raises the question of how far we may diverge from the truth.

[H]yperbole lies, though without any intention to deceive. We must therefore be all the more careful to consider how far we may go in exaggerating facts which our audience may refuse to believe. Again, hyperbole will often cause a laugh. If that was what the orator desired, we may give him credit for wit; otherwise we can only call him a fool.

Regardless of our tolerance towards and natural ability to derhetorize polemic language use, rhetorical practices of othering are not innocent. All examples in my material are fuelled by ideological concerns: the Pharisees

²⁴ Du Toit 1994, 411.

²⁵ See Boyce and Chunnu 2020.

²⁶ Collins 1986, 309.

are immoral in their interpretations and practices, those trying to teach Paul’s converts against his teaching are immoral, selfish, and cursed, and those who do not support Trump are phony or stupid people with a bad agenda.²⁷ *Vilificatio* is used to divide people into good and bad, to reinforce or spread fear of other groups and people.

6. Conclusion

How are the types of *vituperatio* in the classical rhetorical tradition used in the NT and in President Trump’s tweets, respectively? This question is answered in the results and in the summary with the revised list in table 3.

Are the prerequisites for *vituperatio* as a rhetorical strategy different then and now? An answer would require a broad sample. President Trump is not symptomatic of rhetoric today. He is, however, surprisingly “classical” in his *vituperatio*. The similarities greatly outweigh the differences which is all the more surprising considering the vastly different nature of the material: foundational and slowly produced texts from the early Church on the one hand, and short, quickly typed in digital messages of a political nature commenting on current affairs, on the other. There is much more to be researched here.

Some of the prerequisites have changed, others have not. For two millennia, *vituperatio* was considered useful in the repertoire of the educated man. Now it is again “fashionable,” in social media more than ever, although in stark contrast with our increased understanding of the importance of constructive language use. Further study could illuminate whether its popularity stems from a natural, intuitive, rhetorical strategy, from tradition, from efficacy, or perhaps from its entertaining qualities.

Regarding NT texts, a substantial amount of sympathy is typical for commentators. Paul followed the rhetorical customs of his time and his harsh communication is justified by his goals. In the case of Trump, even

²⁷ Trump’s rhetoric is built on strategies that “ingrate Trump with his followers,” on the one hand, and “alienate Trump and his followers against everyone else,” on the other. This is an apt description by Mercieca (2020), but, against her, following the ideal of *vir bonus*, I do not consider Trump a “rhetorical genius” since I find his rhetoric to be insincere, but also due to the quality of his rhetoric, where I agree with Rowland (2019, 377), who explains the power of Trump’s rhetoric, despite “his quite limited capacity for eloquence.”

if some concern for the people could be discerned, he did not deal with questions of the same dignity as Jesus or Paul. Or so we would typically argue. Many of Trump's followers would consider the matters at hand to be of the gravest importance for our generation. In fact, apocalyptic language repeatedly echoes in the narratives of the radical right movement.

The problem with *vituperatio* is its destructiveness. There should not be any defence for language that creates division between people. Unless, of course, their very lives are in danger, which will evidently always be a matter of opinion.

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on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday

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