

Apophthegm Form

Introduction

The apophthegm is a wise maxim or pithy saying.

Its very brevity is a liability, however, because the proverbial wisdom it expresses may only work in certain situations. Consider, for example, Jesus' apophthegm prohibiting judgment: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Matt 7:1), followed almost immediately by an apophthegm encouraging judgment: "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine" (Matt 7:6; one has to judge not only who the dogs and swine are, but what is holy as well!) The teachings are both appropriate depending on the circumstances.

Apophthegmata appear in the gospels in various contexts. Rarely are they merely listed, as they are in the Book of Proverbs. Instead, they are clustered together as in the example above, or more commonly they appear as the concluding word of a short pericope or story (*chreia*). The story provides a context or circumstances in which the pithy saying is clearly appropriate, and thus helps to teach the disciple to discern when these sometimes contradictory proverbs apply.

Structure

The simple apophthegm has no structure because it is just a saying. In Matthew's gospel, the simple apophthegmata are found in the large discourses or sermons where Jesus speaks in monologue. In the narrative sections of the gospel where Jesus speaks in dialogue with various people, the apophthegm is more often the concluding word of a short story or *chreia*, and the whole pericope or passage has a simple structure:

Element	Example (Matthew 13:54-58)
1. Narrative Setting	⁵⁴ He came to his native place and taught the people in their synagogue.
2. Question or Challenge	They were astonished and said, "Where did this man get such wisdom and mighty deeds? ⁵⁵ Is he not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother named Mary and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶ Are not his sisters all with us? Where did this man get all this?" ⁵⁷ And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them,
3. Apophthegm	"A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and in his own house."
4. Narrative Conclusion (summary in nature)	⁵⁸ And he did not work many mighty deeds there because of their lack of faith.

Content

The content is the wisdom of the saying. If a story contextualizes the saying, it is designed to illustrate the same point. Often surrounding material in the gospel helps to contextualize the saying and story even further.

Function

The apophthegmata are designed both to demonstrate the wisdom of the teacher and to teach that wisdom to his/her disciples. When they are set in stories, a structural element of the form is the question from a disciple or the challenge from an opponent. Later gospel readers see their questions answered by the teacher and learn how to respond to those who challenge them. The apophthegmata thus originate in didactic circumstances and in formal and informal debates between competing teachers.

For Further Practice

Matt 15:1-11

Matt 18:1-5

Matt 22:15-22