

Greco-Roman Letters

I. Questions of Genre

A. Deissmann (“Epistles” vs. “Letters”)

1. *Genre Issues.* Early this century, Deissmann distinguished “letter” from “epistles” in an argument over the genre of New Testament documents. Discoveries at the turn of the century of Egyptian papyri documents opened up a whole new world of study of ancient literature. From studying these papyri documents, Deissmann received a distinct impression about the New Testament documents. Epistles, Deissmann said, were composed with public consumption in mind. These documents were formal affairs, actually speeches and other types of public rhetoric preserved in printed form. Letters, on the other hand, said Deissmann, were non-literary, personal documents, private in nature. Deissmann classed the Pauline epistles true “letters.”
2. *Genuine Insight.* While Deissmann’s formal arguments attempting to distinguish letters from epistles has been rejected, his intuitive insight into the nature of the New Testament documents as actual letters has become standard in New Testament study. If Paul’s epistles are normal, first-century letters, then understanding the formal elements of a first-century Greco-Roman letter becomes important background for understanding Paul’s writings. What are these formal elements?

Fee and Stuart in *How To Read the Bible For All It's Worth* list six of them.

B. G-R Letters (Formal Elements)

1. *Writer*. The actual postal system determined the appearance of the formal elements; documents were usually papyrus sheets rolled into a scroll; they did not use envelopes as we do today. The writer is identified first, acting like our return address on the outside of an envelope, telling who sends the letter. Sometimes a title of the sender was given. Also, co-senders would be identified in the opening section. This generally meant they had some role in the letter's composition.
2. *Recipient*. The second identification is to whom the letter is sent, functioning as does our main address on our envelopes.
3. *Greeting*. This is a perfunctory element and most regularly just the one word "greetings" (*chairein*). Also included as a part of the greetings might be a health wish or remembrance, but this feature is sometimes left out.
4. *Thanksgiving*. This was a very short but very regular feature. Its absence would be noticeable. In common G-R style, the thanksgiving would be to the gods for various specified reasons.
5. *Body*. the body contains the main point of the letter. Therefore, this section is important. Formally, one could divide this section into three logical units:

(1) body opening—stilted, formal, a narrow range of acceptable sentences to begin, indicating the importance of the section for expressing the actual purpose for writing; the opening sentence leads to the actual petition or request in the body opening with these elements:

- a. background, to update reader or inform of circumstances surrounding request
- b. petition, restricted to four verbs as proper, as the *erotao* in 2 John 1:5
- c. vocative, addressee formally addressed, as “my lady” (*kuria*) in 2 John 1:5
- d. courtesy, an expression of some acceptable courtesy
- e. request, the action desired by the writer

(2) body middle—Occasional letters were brief, usually expressible on one or two papyrus sheets.

(3) body closing—Wraps up letter, yet customarily leaves open the possibility for future communication. Solidifies, usually by recapitulation, the letter’s purpose; the usual format is:

- a. purpose, a restatement
- b. response, the response desired reiterated
- c. proposal, for further contact

6. *Farewell*. This was a variable section, usually brief, but might have a wish for good health similar to the health wish in the greetings section, and a word of farewell to provide formal closure to the letter.

C. New Testament Comparisons

Studying these six formal elements of the typical Greco-Roman letter, what generalizations can we make about the New Testament documents in comparison? Three observations come to mind:

1. *Expansions*. First, one sees a general Christian tendency to expand each formal element with Christian ideas:
 - a. Writer—not just “Paul” but “Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ by the will of God” in Romans. Compare Titus, 2 Timothy
 - b. Recipient—not just “to the church of God which is at Corinth” but “to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, theirs and ours” in 1 Corinthians. Compare Titus, 2 Timothy
 - b. Greetings—not just “greetings” (*chairein*) but Christianized to “grace” (*charis*) and expanded by options of three other terms—peace, love, and mercy—“May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” as in 2 Peter. Concerning the minor feature of a health wish, one can compare 3 John 2.

- c. **Body**—The greatest Christian expansion often is in the body of the letter, which were generally much longer than typical Greco-Roman letters of just one or two papyrus sheets. These expansions enhance our understanding of early Christian thinking and distinguish this thought from the surrounding first-century environment in long sections of teaching, exhortation, theology, and so forth. Paul is most notable here. The body closing usually has a proposal for further contact as a conventional feature, so 3 John 13–14 probably has nothing to do with the elder’s actual travel plans, for example, but is just the conventional body closing.
 - d. **Farewell**—Christians tended to repeat expressions found in the greetings section, but especially an expression of “peace.”
2. *Omissions*. Second, what is *missing* can sometimes be very meaningful. For example, Paul always had a thanksgiving section in his letters. Never missed a beat. Even the vexing Corinthian congregation, who rejected Paul’s apostolic authority when he had established the church himself, receives a thanksgiving from Paul. All have a thanksgiving portion, that is, all except one—Galatians—the only letter without a thanksgiving section. Do you think the Galatians got the point?
 3. *Classification*. Third, the formal elements show how some New Testament documents resist any neat classification. Hebrews has no formal opening, James, no formal closing, and 1 John

has neither. James and 2 Peter are as close to Deissmann's "epistle" category as anything else in the New Testament, according to F/S.

II. Pauline Epistles

A. Occasional Nature

Occasional nature. Paul's writings when classed as true letters means they were composed mostly with specific, real audiences in mind with specific, real needs to be addressed. Technically, we call these "**occasional documents.**" This means they were occasioned by a very specific situation in a very particular historical context. F/S have two observations about the occasional nature of New Testament letters:

1. *One-ended conversations.* The first observation concerns what one is "hearing" when one reads a New Testament letter. The image of trying to grasp what is being discussed on the telephone when all you can hear is the person in the booth is great. Paul's letters are only one end of very lively conversations. Modern readers are at a great disadvantage in understanding what they are listening in on. In reading the letters, we're hearing only half the conversation. This problem becomes extraordinarily acute in trying to relate 2 Thessalonians to 1 Thessalonians.
2. *Task theology.* these letters were not written to be systematic theologies, nor formal publications of some highly organized

reflection. They were letters in the true sense of the word. Any use of them for theological reflection must first be recognized as a *derivative* use. While the letters might be chock full of theology, we must first see it as theology in the service of some particular need. In humility, we must recognize that our sources for theology limit our systematic work by their very nature. Nor should we suppose that any one author has said all they ever thought, or even given their most important reflection about a particular theological area, in what they do say in one or two epistles written to meet specific needs at a particular time and place. This is what has been termed the “scandal of particularity,” the problem of the “historical contingency” of New Testament letters. The student should be aware that attempting to find coherency within contingency is a major problem driving contemporary Pauline research.

B. Hidden Context

So letters, with their occasional nature, imply that questions of context are crucial for the hermeneutical process. But the context is buried under two thousand years of history and culture. The hidden context must be unfolded as best as one can in two ways: (1) *externally*, the historical/cultural context surrounding a document, and (2) *internally*, the literary context of the document itself.

1. *Historical*. First, one works to establish the historical and cultural context. Bible dictionaries and commentary introductions are good resources for digging out the historical

context of a letter. Then, one sets up an initial understanding of the overall context of the letter itself by reading the document completely through in one sitting, recording initial impressions, and so forth.

2. *Literary*. The crucial advice from F/S here is to “**think paragraphs.**” To do this, F/S recommend that the student write: (1) sentence summaries, that is, read paragraphs and then compose one sentence summaries of each paragraph’s content or point, and then (2) place in the argument, that is set up the logic flow from one section to the next to see exactly what position the verses of interest occupy within the overall argument. This shows what these verses are attempting to do, such as add an illustrating example, or transition to another step in the argument, or conclude a section, etc.

C. **Pauline Distinctives**

Lastly, one needs to be aware of Paul’s distinctives within this letter genre. Two here concern us:

1. *Thematic thanksgivings*. First, when one works in the Pauline epistles, a growing awareness develops that his thanksgiving section is rarely a mere formality of letter writing conventions. Paul uses the thanksgiving section to set up important themes in his letters. If you want to know what’s on Paul’s mind and the deep current that runs throughout any epistle, pay attention to the words, phrases, and thoughts that surface in the thanksgiving section. These will be thematic to the entire letter.

Paul's tone here often is paraenetic and he will use admonitions regularly. We already have mentioned the thanksgiving section that is *absent* from Galatians—and the silence must have been deafening. Or notice the “comfort” word group that so dominates the thanksgiving section of 2 Corinthians. This is both a summary of the biographical situation in Paul's ministry at this point with the arrival of Titus from Macedonia with good news about the Corinthian crisis and thematic to 2 Corinthians.

2. *Formulaic conclusions*. Pauline letter conclusions are fixed stylistically in a never changing order of elements:

(1) hortatory remarks

(2) peace wish

(3) greetings

(4) grace benediction

A particular element may not be present, but the order of elements never is violated. This means a Pauline letter never ends with a peace wish, but rather, always a grace benediction.