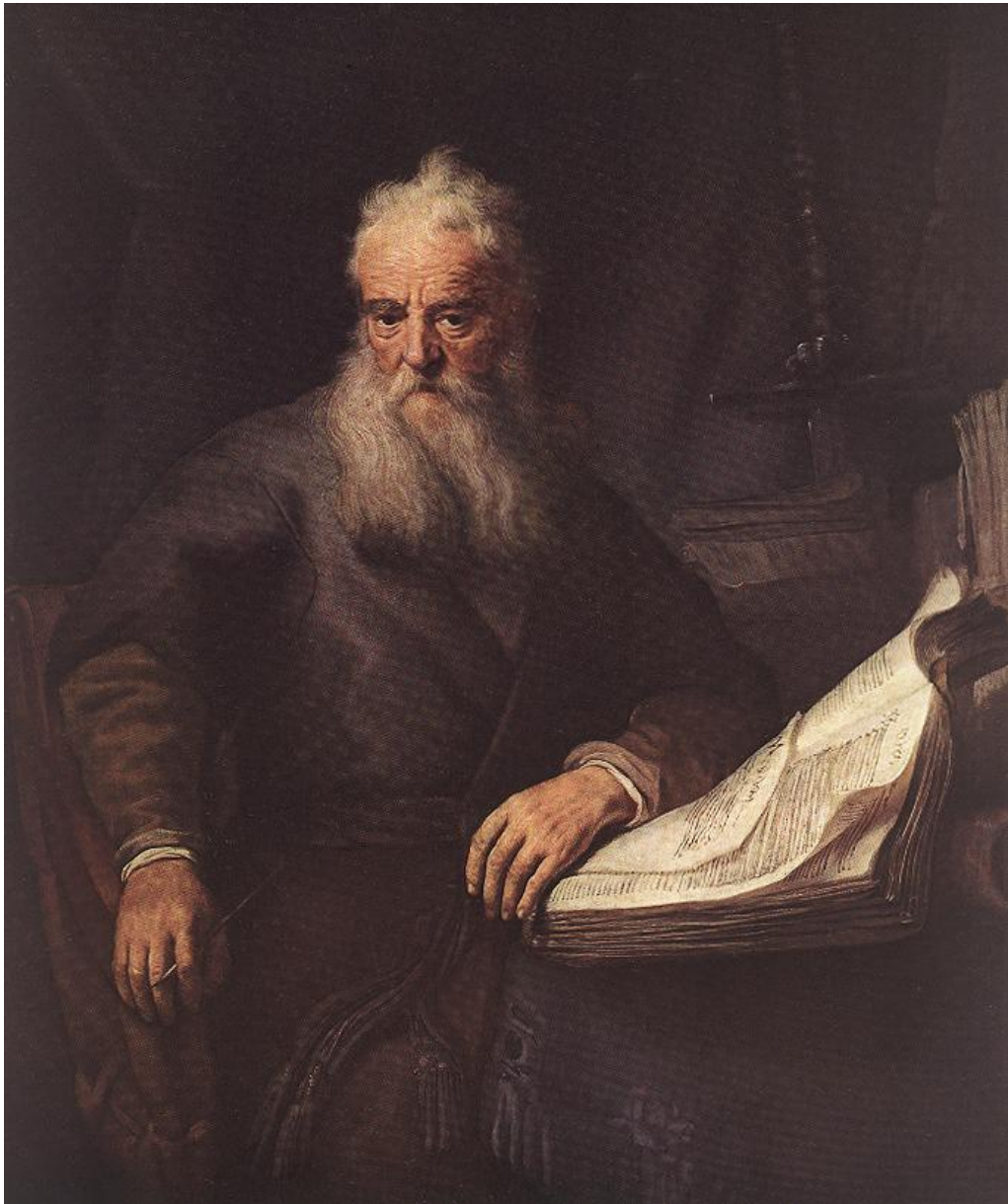


***INTRODUCTION
TO THE
NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS***



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2020

Painting on Front Cover

Apostle Paul

Rembrandt, 1635

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Preface

The New Testament has four main literary genres: *gospel*, *history*, *letters*, and *apocalyptic*. These four genres are not independent (gospel can be viewed as a subcategory of history) nor exhaustive (the letters, for example, contain other genres such as poetry), but they give us a sense of the major components to the New Testament.

The Old Testament contains or refers to several letters¹, but most of the Old Testament is history (even the prophetic books were considered history by the Jews). This emphasis upon history is understandable when one realizes that the Jews properly saw God at work in their history to accomplish his purposes.

In contrast, a major portion of the New Testament is comprised of letters. This is consistent with one scholars' observation concerning the wide use of letters in the New Testament era:

The popularity of the letter form increased significantly during the Hellenistic period due to a variety of factors: the increase in scribal learning and influence, the growing availability and relatively inexpensive cost of papyrus as a writing material, the need to monitor accurately expansions in the area of trade and commerce and the desire of political leaders to spread imperial propaganda. The Roman period witnessed an even greater rise in this literary form as the letter increasingly became a common means of communication among people of all stations in life, thereby causing one modern scholar to note that "letter writing was almost a disease" (Brooke). [Weima, p.640]

The Greek word used in the New Testament for letter is *epistole*. The King James Version at times translated this as '*letter*' (especially when it occurred in the plural '*letters*') and at times simply transliterated it as '*epistle*' (especially when referring to writings of an apostle). Modern translations uniformly translate as '*letter(s)*'. Unfortunately, the use of the term *epistle* disguised the fact that the New Testament writings were common letters and not some special literary form used only by the apostles. This was reinforced by the fact that until the early 20th century the only ancient Greek letters that had been preserved were highly literary writings by men such as Plato or Demosthenes or the letters of Epicurus, Seneca, and Pliny. But the discovery of thousands of papyri revealed the commonplace occurrence of letters by those in every strata of society. Remarkably, the form of all the letters were similar and shared many common characteristics. Thus, even though some still try to make a distinction between *letters* and *epistles* it is much better to simply use the designation *letter* to refer to all these writings with the understanding that the literary quality and purpose can vary between letters, just like it does today.

Every genre has its own characteristics and those characteristics must be understood if one is to properly interpret their message. Our task in this study is to explore the nature of ancient letters and to see how that helps us to understand the letters in the New Testament. Consequently, we will not be studying the content of the New Testament letters, but will be focusing upon their structure and form – what one writer has phrased as the letter's "anatomy" [Roetzel]. Thus, this is an introductory study that will prepare us for further studies of the New Testament letters.

The *English Standard Version* (ESV; Text Edition 2016²) will be used as the basis of this study.

May God bless our study.

¹ Sennacherib to Hezekiah (2 Kgs 19:9-14; letters in Ezra (4:11-16; 17-23; 5:6-17; 6:2-12; 7:11-26) – two scribes are named: Shimshai (4:8) and Ezra (7:11); Sanballat to Nehemiah (Neh 6:5-7); Jeremiah to the exiles (Jer.29); letters of King Ahasuerus (Esther 1:22; 3:13; 8:8ff; 9:10ff)

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright ©2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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Lesson 1

The Nature of Letters

Letters have always served as a primary means of communication. If distance prevented direct oral communication, then a messenger was sent to deliver a letter that would be orally read. A letter has the distinct advantage of being able to be preserved long after an oral communication is forgotten. We possess thousands of letters written in antiquity that enable us to understand the history and culture of that era. Future generations may not be so fortunate in their study of our times. Much of our communication is electronic that will certainly perish in computer junkyards and recycling centers.

The Occasional Nature of Letters

The fundamental fact about all letters is that they are *occasional*. That is, the author wrote the letter to a specific recipient for a definite purpose. Thus, the things communicated usually have meaning that is unique to their relationship. Consequently, when persons other than the author or the recipient read the letter they will often have to “read between the lines” to understand what is being written. So, to have the best chance to fully understand a letter, one must know the answer to the following basic questions:

- Who wrote the letter? (i.e., who is the author(s)?)
- To whom is the letter written? (i.e., who is the recipient(s)?)
- What is the nature of the letter? (e.g., formal, informal, private, business-like, etc.)
- When was the letter written?
- Where are the author and the recipient at the time of writing?
- Why was the letter written?

Exercise Study the following letter and from its contents answer the questions below. The underlined information in italics has been purposefully omitted to increase the challenge. After completing the exercise, additional information concerning this letter can be found at the end of this lesson.

<u>Writer's Location</u> <u>Date of Writing</u>
To Mrs. Bixby, <u>Recipient's Location</u>
Dear Madam:
I have just been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjunct General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to bequile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tending you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.
Yours very sincerely and respectfully, A. Lincoln

1. Who do you think is the author of the letter?

2. To whom was the letter written? What is your impression of her?

3. Are the writer and the recipient acquainted?

4. What kind of letter is it?

5. When was the letter written? (Be as specific as possible and state the reasons for your conclusion.)

6. Where are the author and the recipient located?

7. Why was the letter written?

8. Are the contents of a letter necessarily true? For example, in this case, did a Mrs. Bixby really live who lost five sons in a war? How does one know for sure?

9. Now imagine someone living in a country somewhere in Africa (if it still goes by that name) in the year 3000. Further imagine that this person finds a copy of this same letter. Would he be able to answer the above questions as easily as you have now?

What additional challenges would this person have in understanding the letter?

How could those challenges be overcome?

The New Testament Letters

The majority of the New Testament books are generally classified as letters (22 of 27). Of these, most name Paul as the sender (13) with the remaining either written by Peter (2), James (1), John (3), Jude (1), or are anonymous (2) - Hebrews and 1 John). Actually, Hebrews, 1 John, and Revelation do not have all the hallmarks of a letter, as we will see. Hebrews and 1 John are *homilies* (sermons) designed to exhort and encourage, and Revelation is more properly classified as *apocalyptic*.

The New Testament letters are organized as shown in the following chart.

New Testament Letters	
Letters of Paul	
<i>Letters to Congregations</i>	
Romans	
1 Corinthians	
2 Corinthians	
Galatians	
Ephesians	
Philippians	
Colossians	
1 Thessalonians	
2 Thessalonians	
<i>Letters to Individuals</i>	
<i>The Pastoral¹ Letters</i>	
1 Timothy	
2 Timothy	
Titus	
Philemon	
[<i>The Prison² Letters</i> : Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon]	
General (or Catholic³) Letters	
Hebrews (Pauline? ⁴)	
James	
1 Peter	
2 Peter	
1 John	
2 John	
3 John	
Jude	
Revelation	
Notes	
¹ The grouping of "pastoral letters" was first used in the 18 th century. These three letters do have some common elements, but their similarity should not detract from their individuality.	
² Paul states that he is a prisoner at the time he wrote these letters. Paul also identifies himself as a prisoner in 2 Timothy (1:8), which shows the weakness of our classifications.	
³ "Catholic" simply means "universal". Some, but not all, of these letters were written to a broad group of Christians.	
⁴ Hebrews has been traditionally assigned to Paul (and was typically grouped with the Pauline letters in early manuscripts), but that was not the view of some early Christians, nor has it found much support since the time of the Reformation.	

The Canonical Order of the New Testament Letters

Clearly, the letters of Paul are grouped together in the canon and are placed before the other letters. Further, Paul's letters are separated into those written to churches and those written to individuals. But within the collection of Paul's Letters and General Letters, why are the letters ordered the way they are? Several ordering schemes are used today: thematic, chronological, alphabetical, etc. However, these were not common schemes in antiquity, nor would they be particularly useful for the New Testament letters since the letters are not dated and each letter may contain multiple themes.

The most common scheme in antiquity was descending order of length, i.e. the longer letters were placed first. For example, this appears to be the scheme used in ordering the Major and Minor Prophets in the Old Testament. Where we might use the number of words or letters to determine the length of a document, the ancients used the number of lines (called *stichoi*, Greek for *lines* or *rows*) contained within the letter. Hence, *stichometry* is the science of the measurement of books. "...(S)tichos probably corresponded originally to a line of hexameter verse such as was used by Homer or Virgil and amounted usually to sixteen (or sometimes fifteen) syllables..." [Finegan, 39]. It was not uncommon for the number of stichoi in a document to be given at the end of the document (or perhaps in a prologue) to be used, apparently, as a basis for determining the value of the document, or perhaps as a basis for paying the scribe who copied the document.

Murphy-O'Connor [121] prepared the following table showing different measurements of the length of Paul's letters.

Length of Pauline Letters							
	<u>Words</u>	<u>Letters</u>		<u>Stichoi</u>			
		Graux	Trobisch	<i>p46</i> (AD 200)	Sinaiticus (4 th Cent.)	Harris	Euthalius (4 th Cent.)
Romans	7111	35266	34410	1000		942	920
1 Corinthians	6829	32685	32767			897	870
2 Corinthians	4477	21851	22280		612	610	590
Galatians	2230	11202	11091	375 ¹	312	304	293
Ephesians	2435	11932	12012	316	312	325	312
Philippians	1629	7975	8009	225	200 ²	218	208
Colossians	1582	7745	7897		300	215	208
1 Thessalonians	1481	7468	7423			202	193
2 Thessalonians	823	4011	4055		180	112	106
1 Timothy	1591	8575	8869		250	239	230
2 Timothy	1238	6554	6538		180	177	172
Titus	659	3595	3733		96	98	97
Philemon	335	1567	1575			42	38
Hebrews	4953	26738	26382	700	750	714	703

Notes ¹ Murphy-O'Conner based this chart upon the work of Finegan, but he thinks the correct stichoi count for Galatians in *p46* is 275.
² Murphy-O'Conner thinks 200 is a scribal error for 300.

In general, it does seem that the letters of Paul are ordered on the basis of decreasing number of stichoi, except in the case of Galatians and Ephesians. Since the stichoi count varies with different manuscripts, a different order could be arrived at and, in fact, other orders do exist in some ancient manuscripts of the New Testament. In some manuscripts Philippians and Colossians are reversed (e.g. Codex Claromontanus (D 06) and Minuscule 5) perhaps due to the close association between Ephesians and Colossians. In *p46*, Galatians and Ephesians are reversed so that the descending length order is properly maintained.

However, the variations from the canonical order are very rare¹, except in the case of Hebrews. In various manuscripts it was placed at different locations: after Romans (only in *p46* – on the basis of the stichoi count it should have been placed between 1 and 2 Corinthians, but the desire to keep those letters together probably determined the placement), after Thessalonians (thus making it last of the letters to ‘congregations’), or after Philemon (thus making it last in the entire collection of Paul’s letters). The last two placements perhaps reflect the uncertainty of its authorship.

It seems safe to conclude that Paul’s letters are listed in order of decreasing length, and the same seems to be generally true for the General Letters also. The exceptions can be easily explained. For example, even though 1 John is longer than 2 Peter, the desire to keep Peter’s and John’s letters together is understandable. In the case of Revelation, its unique literary structure or its probable position as being the last letter to have been written would warrant it being placed last in the canon.

A Note Concerning The Acts of the Apostles

Since Acts is written to a man named Theophilus, one might think that Acts should also be classified as a letter. As we will see in the next lesson, ancient letters had a common, and very distinct, form that was almost universally followed – a form that is absent from Acts.

Acts is a work of *history*. Scholars debate the type of history, but most all agree that it is history. Those who don’t either classify it as biography (which possibly can be seen as a special subset of history) or they classify it as fiction (unfortunately, and date it as having been written in the 2nd century). Ancient works of history were occasionally addressed to an individual, often the author’s patron (that is, the individual who sponsored the writing). But as a historical work, the writing was intended for a broad range of recipients.

¹ Trobisch [*Paul’s Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins*] thinks it highly unlikely that the canonical order would be uniform in different manuscripts if the letters of Paul were randomly and gradually assembled over time. Thus, he argues that the uniform order points to an original collection that may have been started by Paul himself. One interesting feature Trobisch uses to support his thesis is the uniform titles for the Pauline letters in all manuscripts. Whereas the General Letters are titled after the name of the author, the Pauline letters are titled after the recipients: “To the Romans”, “To the Corinthians”, etc. That feature makes sense if all the Pauline letters were part of a collection that was understood to have a common author, and since all manuscripts use the same titles it suggests that there was an original collection which formed the basis of all the manuscripts. Trobisch’s thesis has received some support from other scholars, but still seems to be a minority view.

The Bixby Letter

Missing information from copy of letter above is as follows:

*Executive Mansion,
Washington, Nov. 21, 1864.*

To Mrs. Bixby, Boston, Mass.

Often called "America's Most Famous Letter" and praised alongside of the Gettysburg Address as one of Lincoln's finest works, the Bixby Letter has consumed the attention of Lincoln historians. The letter was written in response to an inquiry made by the Massachusetts Governor John Andrews after he had met Mrs. Bixby and she had conveyed to him her plight.

In fact, only two of Mrs. Bixby's sons had died in battle as Union soldiers. Another was honorably discharged, one deserted, and the last was presumably imprisoned, but his manner of death is uncertain. Whether Mrs. Bixby actually thought her five sons had died when she talked with Governor Andrews is uncertain. A case has been made that she intentionally deceived the Governor in hopes of money. Contemporaries described her as a madam and "untrustworthy and as bad as she could be". Further, she was a Confederate sympathizer and her great grandson reported that his father had said she hated Lincoln and that she had destroyed the letter. The text as given above was published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* on November 25, 1864, the same day it was delivered to her by the Adjutant General of Massachusetts, William Schouler. Many have claimed to have found the original letter, but all are believed to be forgeries, or copies of forgeries. If found, one estimate has been that it might sell at auction for \$20 million.

In addition, some historians have argued that Lincoln did not personally write the letter, but had assigned that task to his secretary, John Hay. The evidence is mixed, and the truth may never be known (but, of course, that simply allows people to continue to claim that they know the truth).

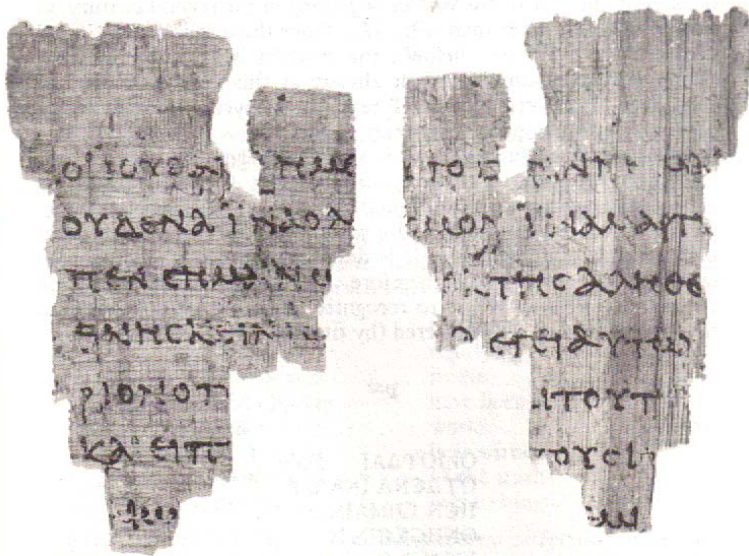
Additional information can be conveniently found in Wikipedia, "Bixby Letter" [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bixby_letter].

Lesson 2**Ancient Letters and the New Testament****Ancient Writing Materials**

Ancient documents used several different writing mediums: clay, stone, ivory, wood, wax, papyrus, leather, metal, and ostraca. In New Testament times, papyrus was by far the most common for letters.

Papyrus (Lat. *papyrus*, Gk. *papuros*, Eng. *paper*) is formed from the pith of a reed plant (also called papyrus) that predominantly grew in swamps along the Nile, but it also grew in Palestine. "The pith of the reed was cut into strips about twelve to fifteen inches long and laid in two layers, alternately horizontally and vertically. The sheets were left to dry on a flat surface with a weight on top, causing the natural sugar in the plant to bond the layers together" [Wegner, 90]. The front (*recto*) side had the strips running horizontally and was the first side written on. At times, the back side (*verso*) was also written on. Writing on papyrus was done with a reed and ink. The Egyptians used papyrus for over 4,000 years (3100 BC to AD 1000). Although papyrus was eventually used throughout the Greek and Roman world, the majority of ancient papyri that have been recovered are from Egypt due to its dry climate. Presumably, New Testament manuscripts were originally written on papyrus.

"The ink essentially consisted of lamp black or soot, which was mixed with water and a rubbery gum adhesive. In Greek it is therefore called ... the "black," but red ink was also produced. Vendors sold the ink in the dried condition; for writing it was blended again with water. ... But the standard writing instrument over the long term became the reed pen. ... For writing the pen was given a diagonal point with a knife and pumice stone and resharpened if necessary. By a fine incision through this point one obtained two points, as with a modern metal fountain pen, that made writing more reliable." [Klauck, 51-52]



Papyrus Rylands Greek 457 (p52): *recto*: John 18:31-33; *verso*: John 18:37-38. The oldest known fragment of a New Testament text, c. AD 100-125 [Finegan, 85]

Interesting, John refers to paper, pen and ink in his short letters (2 John 12; 3 John 13).

Individual sheets of papyrus or leather (parchment) could be joined together to form a scroll (Gk. *biblos* = Eng. book). The typical papyrus scroll consisted of 20 sheets giving a length of about 14 feet. Writing was organized into columns. Jews still write the Torah with black ink on parchment scrolls.

"The length of such a papyrus roll was limited by considerations of convenience in handling the roll; the normal Greek literary roll seldom exceeded 35 feet in length...The two longest books in the New Testament – the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts – would have filled an ordinary papyrus roll of 31 or 32 feet. Doubtless this is one of the reasons why Luke-Acts was issued in two volumes instead of one." [Metzger, 5-6]

By the second century AD, the codex for the most part replaced scrolls as the most commonly used book form.

“As time passed it was discovered that the sheets of papyrus could be placed on top of each other, folded in the middle, and bound, resulting in easy-to-use book called a ‘codex.’ David Ewert, former president of Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg, Manitoba, explains: ‘The Latin word *codex* originally meant the trunk of a tree, and then a block of wood split up into tablets or leaves. Such wooden tablets (perhaps coated with wax) were bound together to make a book. The same was done with leaves or sheets of papyrus. A codex, then, is a leaf book.’ The codex was a significant improvement over scrolls, being easier to manage and easier to use in locating passages, but scrolls continued to be used in the synagogues even after the second century A.D., when the codex was introduced for private use. Christians quickly adopted the codex for its convenience, allowing multiple books in one codex.” [Wegner, 30]

The Form of Ancient Letters Letters are used for a wide variety of purposes: private communications, public announcements, commercial transactions, governmental business, etc. Yet, the form of letters is remarkably similar. This is no less true today than in the past.

The common form for letters today is:

- Date*
- Dear X,*
- Body of the Letter*
- Sincerely, Yours Truly, ... Y*

The common form of Greco-Roman (also called Hellenistic) letters was (beginning in the 4th century BC, [Reese, 18]):

Opening

Prescription: X (superscription) to Y (adscriptio), greetings (salutation)
Health Wish (Optional)
Thanksgiving (Optional)

Body of the Letter

Closing (Subscription)

Greetings from Acquaintances (Optional)
Farewell Expression (Optional)
Benediction (Optional)
Date (Optional)

Capes, Reeves, and Richards [55-56] observe:

“Because of the unifying force of the Roman Empire (and of the Greeks previously), there was a good deal of commonality in letter-writing customs. From England to Egypt, we find Greco-Roman letters following the same format and using the same language, and even generally the same diction and rhetoric. Even while Jews (and some other cultures) stubbornly held on to their local languages, they still followed the general format of the Greco-Roman letter. When we compare Greek and Latin papyrus letters, we find them strikingly similar, even though the languages are different. Because of the similarities, scholars speak of Greco-Roman letters.”

The opening *X to Y, greetings*, was the standard form used when an author was addressing a recipient of equal, or lower, rank. But, if the author was addressing one of higher rank

then the opening *To Y, greetings, X* was used. [Achtmeier, et. al., 274f], which was typical of petitionary letters [Weima, *Neglected Endings*, 30].

Examples of Ancient Letters

Letter of Apion The following letter is the first of two letters written by Apion that have been found in Egypt; both Apion and Epimachos are Egyptian names. The letter has been dated to the 2nd century and was written on a single sheet of papyrus [Klauck, 10-11].

Apion to Epimachos, his father and lord, very many greetings. Before all else I pray that you are well and that you may prosper in continual health, together with my sister and her daughter and my brother. I give thanks to the lord Serapis, because when I was endangered at sea, he rescued me immediately. When I arrived at Misenum, I received as traveling money from Caesar three gold pieces, and I am well. Therefore, I request you, my lord father, write me a letter, first about your welfare, secondly about the welfare of my siblings, thirdly, in order that I may make obeisance before your hand(writing), because you trained me well, and I hope by this means quickly to advance, the gods willing. Salute Kaption very much and my siblings and Serenilla and my friends. I sent my portrait to you through Euktemonos. My name is Antonius Maximus. I pray that you are well. Company Athenonike.

In the left margin (addendum):

Serenos, the (son) of Agathodaimon, salutes you ..., and ..., the (son) of ...ros, and Tourbon, the son of Gallonios, and D...nas, the (son) of ...

On the reverse side (outside address):

To Philadelphia, to Epimachos from (his) son, Apion.

In the opposite direction (additional address):

Deliver at the camp of the first cohort of the Apameni to Julianus, vice-secretary, (this letter) from Apion so that (it may be forwarded) to his father, Epimachos.

Letter of Irenaeus The following is a typical Greek letter from the 2nd or 3rd century that was written on papyrus [Barrett, 30; cf. Roetzel, 61]:

Irenaeus to Apollinarius his dearest brother many greetings. I pray continually for your health, and I myself am well. I wish you to know that I reached land on the sixth of the month Epeiph and we unloaded our cargo on the eighteenth of the same month. I went up to Rome, on the twenty-fifth of the same month and the place welcomed us as the god willed, and we are daily expecting our discharge, it so being that up till today nobody in the corn fleet has been released. Many salutations to your wife and to Serenus and to all who love you, each by name. Goodbye. Mesare 9.

Most ancient letters were rather short. Richards [163] reports that in "approximately 14,000 private letters from Greco-Roman antiquity, the average length was about 87 words" which could fit on one papyrus sheet. By comparison, the average length of Paul's thirteen letters is 2,495 words (Reece, 13).

"Writers of literary letters, who had the luxury of using additional sheets of papyrus that had been glued together into rolls, often produced much longer works: Cicero's letters range from 22 to 2,530 words, with an average of 295; Seneca's range from

149 to 4,134, with an average of 955; Paul's range from 335 (Philemon) to 7,114 (Romans), with an average of 2,495 (based on a corpus of all thirteen letters)." [Reese, 13].

New Testament Letters

Most New Testament letters including the two embedded letters within Acts (15:23-29; 23:26-30) follow this form. The shorter New Testament letters (Philemon, 2 & 3 John, and Jude) are especially similar to the common letter of the 1st century.

Examples Consider the short letters of Philemon and 3 John. Use your Bible as you review the form of these letters.

PHILEMON

Opening (Verses 1-7)

Superscription: "Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother"

Adscription: "To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and the beloved Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house"

Salutation: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Thanksgiving: "I thank my God, ..."

Body of the Letter (Verses 8-22)

Closing (Verses 23-25)

Greetings: "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers."

Benediction: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

3 JOHN

Opening (Verses 1-4)

Superscription: "The elder"

Adscription: "To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth."

Health Wish: "Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul."

Body of the Letter (Verses 5-12)

Closing (Verses 13-14)

Farewell: "I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face."

Greetings: "Peace to you. Our friends greet you. Greet the friends by name."

Lesson 3 **The Opening Prescript of New Testament Letters**

Ancient letters uniformly opened with a very formal structure that identified the author and recipient and extended the author's greetings. The letters of the New Testament have this same structure. Review the chart on page 3-3 that summarizes the author identification in New Testament letters.

In comparing Paul's Letters with the General Letters, two features of Paul's letters are noteworthy. First, Paul's self-description is more elaborate (sometimes much more so) than that provided by the authors of the General Letters. Second, in most of Paul's letters other names are listed along with Paul.

Author's Self-Description

In most private correspondence (both ancient and modern), the author does not need to identify himself except by name. For example, John was clearly close to his recipients in 2 John and 3 John so it would have been strange for him to elaborate upon who he was. Since it is known or presumed that recipients of the New Testament letters personally knew, or at least knew of, the author, it raises the question why Paul and Peter expanded their identification to include their apostleship. Didn't the recipients already know that they were apostles? In the case of James, why would he feel the need to identify himself as a "*servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ*"?

Stirewalt [33f] believes that Paul (and presumably James and Peter) borrowed the practice of official letters in ancient times where the sender included a statement of his position or rank. In official letters that practice highlighted the need for the recipient to give heed to the authority inherent in the letter. In this view, Paul and Peter are reminding their readers of their apostleship so that the readers accept their authoritative instruction.

The case of James is interesting. James was the brother of Jesus in the flesh (Mt 13:55), but he does not mention that relationship. Instead, he simply claims to be a servant of God and Jesus. It is generally believed that James was not a believer in Jesus during Jesus' ministry (see Jn.7:2-5). Thus, instead of asserting for himself a high position, James humbly identifies himself as a servant – a characteristic James encourages in his letter.

Stirewalt is probably correct in his understanding of the role that the self-identification played in the letter. This explanation would explain why Paul does not include an authoritative self-description in his letter to Philemon. Even though Paul was making a request of Philemon, he was doing so as a friend and not as an apostle (v.8-9). A similar observation could be made about his letter to the Philippians (see below under *Multiple Authors*).

But there is still another level to consider. Whereas Peter is content to simply identify themselves as an apostle, why does Paul customarily adds that his apostleship is "*by the will of God*"? The most natural explanation is that since Paul was one who was "*untimely born*" (1 Cor 15:8) in that Jesus appeared to him after the other apostles, Paul was often suspected of not being a genuine apostle, or that his apostleship was in some way dependent upon the prior apostles. This explanation seems clearly to be the case in his relationship with the Galatians. In that letter, Paul, in addition to saying that his apostleship was from God and Jesus, explicitly states that it was "*not from men nor through man*" (1:1). Within that letter, Paul goes to great lengths to demonstrate that his message was in no way derived from what he had heard from the other apostles. Thus, his self-description serves as a prelude to a theme within the letter.

The longest self-description that Paul writes of himself is in the letter to the Romans – a full six verses. Besides asserting his apostleship, Paul summarizes his mission as an apostle to the Gentiles, which included the Gentile brethren at Rome. Given that Paul had never been to Rome and did not know many of the brethren personally, it seems appropriate that Paul begins his letter with a clear self-description so that his words would get a fair hearing.

A careful consideration of the self-description, at least in the case of Paul's letters, is useful in understanding the purpose behind the letter.

Multiple Authors

Multiple authors of a letter was very uncommon in ancient times [Prior, 37f; Fee, 30], but 8 of the 13 letters in the Pauline corpus include within the superscription one or more individuals in addition to Paul (all other NT letters only have a single author). Whether it is appropriate to refer to the other individuals listed as authors is much discussed and debated. Could they simply be co-senders without having a share of the authorship?

In some of Paul's letters, the first-person singular is used throughout the letter even if multiple authors/senders are listed. For example, in 1 Corinthians, both Paul and Sosthenes are listed as authors/senders of the letter. But immediately after the opening, the pronoun "I" is repeatedly used: "*I give thanks...*" (1:4), "*I appeal to you, brothers...*" (1:10), "*I thank God...*" (1:14), etc. It seems unavoidable that the Corinthians would have understood that Paul alone was the author. If so, then why did Paul include Sosthenes in the prescript? In this case, the answer may depend upon who Sosthenes is. The only other Sosthenes mentioned in the New Testament was the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth who was beaten before Gallio (Acts 18:17). Could it be that this Sosthenes was later converted and became a co-worker of Paul? If so, then the inclusion of Sosthenes could simply be an extension of courtesy to one known by the recipients. This is also the case in the letters sent to the Galatians, the Philippians, and to Philemon. In Colossians, the first-person plural is used in the thanksgiving and prayer, but the first-person singular is used in the body and closing of the letter. Thus, in these cases it seems that the co-sender of greetings was a result of the co-sender's relationship with the recipients.

Stirewalt [42], in seeing parallels between Paul's letters and the official letters of that day, thinks the inclusion of co-senders is for the purpose of sharing in some sense the author's authority with the others listed. Whether that explains the inclusion of Sosthenes in 1 Corinthians is uncertain (especially since we cannot know for sure who Sosthenes is), but it may explain many of the instances when Silas or Timothy are listed since they had an active role in Paul's ministry and were his delegates on many occasions.

There are two notable instances where multiple authorship is probable. 1 and 2 Thessalonians lists Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy as authors and throughout the letter, the first-person plural ("*we*", "*our*") is used (except 1 Thess 3:5; 5:27; 2 Thess 2:5; 3:17). Given that all three helped in establishing the church in Thessalonica, it seems that all three were authors in a significant sense. But even with these letters, the occasional first-person singular probably suggests that Paul was still the one who "controlled the pen" in these compositions (see 1 Thess 5:27; 2 Thess 3:17).

2 Corinthians may be another such instance since there is a mixture of first-person singular and first-person plural throughout the letter, but commentators are divided (see discussion by Curry, 50-52, and Murphy-O'Connor, 24-31).

The Author of New Testament Letters		
	<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Self-Description</i>
<i>Romans</i>	Paul	"a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God...Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations."
<i>1 Corinthians</i>	Paul Sosthenes	"called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus" "our brother"
<i>2 Corinthians</i>	Paul Timothy	"an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" "our brother"
<i>Galatians</i>	Paul "all the brothers who are with me"	"an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father..."
<i>Ephesians</i>	Paul	"an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God"
<i>Philippians</i>	Paul Timothy	"servants of Christ Jesus"
<i>Colossians</i>	Paul Timothy	"an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" "our brother"
<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy	
<i>2 Thessalonians</i>	Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy	
<i>1 Timothy</i>	Paul	"an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope"
<i>2 Timothy</i>	Paul	"an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus"
<i>Titus</i>	Paul	"a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth...through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior"
<i>Philemon</i>	Paul Timothy	"a prisoner for Christ Jesus" "our brother"
<i>Hebrews</i>		
<i>James</i>	James	"a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ"
<i>1 Peter</i>	Peter	"an apostle of Jesus Christ"
<i>2 Peter</i>	Simon Peter	"a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ"
<i>1 John</i>		
<i>2 John</i>	The elder	
<i>3 John</i>	The elder	
<i>Jude</i>	Jude	"a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James"
<i>Revelation</i>	John	"your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus"

Recipients

The most obvious observation in reviewing the recipients who received the New Testament letters (see chart on page 3-5) is that either a broad group of Christians were addressed as a whole or an individual is addressed. If a group is addressed, there is some commonality within the group that binds them together in the author's mind. Usually it is the simple fact that a group of Christians lived and worked in the same area that brought them together as a church. Five of Paul's letters are addressed to a church (or churches – Galatia) and John writes Revelation to the "seven churches of Asia" (1:4).

Occasionally Paul avoids the term "church". For example, in writing the Romans, Paul addresses "all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints." Based on the wording of Paul's closing greetings in Romans 16, it is generally believed that there were multiple churches in Rome. If so, it is understandable why Paul uses a general address in opening the letter. Whether this explanation would be true for his letters to the Philippians and Colossians is unknown. Similarly, Philemon was written to "the church in your house" (1:2) suggesting perhaps other house churches existed in Colossae.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is unique in that no description of where Paul's recipients lived is given. The phrase "in Ephesus" found in our Bible is not found in some early manuscripts, hence it is generally thought that this was a "circular letter" that was intended to be shared by many congregations (in Asia?).

As one might expect, individuals who received a New Testament letter were well-known by the author and, based on the descriptions given, were generally highly regarded by him.

Greetings

Most ancient letters, and especially official letters, included a salutation (unless it was written by person of low rank to one of higher rank). The standard Greek salutation was "greetings" (Gk. *chairein*). This is exactly the form found in the embedded letters in Acts (15:23; 23:26) and in the letter by James (1:1).

Paul never uses this secular greeting, but rather uses "grace" (Gk. *charis*; a play on words?) along with the standard Jewish salutation "peace"¹. Paul always sees God as the source of grace and peace. Interestingly, Peter and John (in Revelation) use the same pair of words as greetings. In 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul adds a third term "mercy"; a three-fold greeting that John (2 John) and Jude also use. A chart giving the greetings found in the New Testament letters is on page 3-6.

Only 3 John of the NT letters does not include a greeting.

Hebrews and 1 John

As noted in Lesson 1, Hebrews and 1 John are sermons, not letters. This can be easily seen by the complete absence of a prescription (superscription, adscription, and greetings).

¹ "Jewish letters of the period tend to replace 'greetings' ... with 'peace' (Greek *eirēnē*; reflecting Hebrew *shālom*) and to be more expansive in its description of the persons involved..." [Brown, 414].

The Recipients of New Testament Letters		
	<i>Recipients</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Romans</i>	"all those in Rome"	"called to belong to Jesus Christ", "who are loved by God and called to be saints"
<i>1 Corinthians</i>	"the church of God that is in Corinth"	"those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours"
<i>2 Corinthians</i>	"the church of God in Corinth with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia"	
<i>Galatians</i>	"the churches of Galatia"	
<i>Ephesians</i>	"the saints who are in Ephesus"	"and are faithful in Christ Jesus"
<i>Philippians</i>	"all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons"	
<i>Colossians</i>	"the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae"	
<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	"the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"	
<i>2 Thessalonians</i>	"the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"	
<i>1 Timothy</i>	Timothy	"my true child in the faith"
<i>2 Timothy</i>	Timothy	"my beloved child"
<i>Titus</i>	Titus	"my true child in a common faith"
<i>Philemon</i>	Philemon Apphia Archippus and "the church in your house"	"our beloved fellow worker" "our sister" "our fellow soldier"
<i>Hebrews</i>		
<i>James</i>	"the twelve tribes in the Dispersion"	
<i>1 Peter</i>	"those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia"	"according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood"
<i>2 Peter</i>	"those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours"	"by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ"
<i>1 John</i>		
<i>2 John</i>	"the elect lady and her children"	"whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever"
<i>3 John</i>	"the beloved Gaius"	"whom I love in truth"
<i>Jude</i>	"those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ"	
<i>Revelation</i>	"the seven churches that are in Asia"	

<i>The Greetings of New Testament Letters</i>	
<i>Romans</i>	"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"
<i>1 Corinthians</i>	"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"
<i>2 Corinthians</i>	"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"
<i>Galatians</i>	"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen."
<i>Ephesians</i>	"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"
<i>Philippians</i>	"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"
<i>Colossians</i>	"Grace to you and peace from God our Father"
<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	"Grace to you and peace"
<i>2 Thessalonians</i>	"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"
<i>1 Timothy</i>	"Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord"
<i>2 Timothy</i>	"Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord"
<i>Titus</i>	"Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior"
<i>Philemon</i>	"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"
<i>Hebrews</i>	
<i>James</i>	"Greetings"
<i>1 Peter</i>	"May grace and peace be multiplied to you"
<i>2 Peter</i>	"May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord"
<i>1 John</i>	
<i>2 John</i>	"Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love"
<i>3 John</i>	
<i>Jude</i>	"May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you"
<i>Revelation</i>	"Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth."

Lesson 4 The Thanksgiving Prayer and Closing of New Testament Letters

Thanksgiving Prayers

The typical ancient letter followed the opening prescription with a prayer to the gods for the recipient's good health. A similar opening prayer to God is recorded in 3 John, but with an added emphasis on spiritual health: "*Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul*" (3 John 2).

Paul transformed this practice by offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the Christians he was writing (see chart on page 4-2, 3). In fact, "we have no other ancient letter writer who had such elaborate and extended thanksgivings." [Capes, p.59] Generally, Paul is thankful for their spiritual growth as reflected in their faithfulness, brotherly love, and steadfastness. That Paul expresses this as a prayer to God underlines the fact that he saw God as the source for their growth. Paul often extended his prayer to request God's continued blessings.

The specific area of growth that Paul identifies within his prayer is appropriate for each recipient. For example, one of Paul's first letters was 1 Thessalonians written to the church at Thessalonica. Throughout the letter Paul expresses the concern he had for them after he had to quickly leave the city because of persecution. No doubt that the pressure from the Jews that forced him to leave would also be exerted on the young converts. Paul was greatly relieved to hear Timothy's report (3:6) of their continued faithfulness. Consequently, when Paul opened his letter, his prayer of thanksgiving was for "*their work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1:3). Such was Paul's thankfulness that he offers another prayer of thanksgiving to God within the body of the letter (3:11-13).

Two more examples will help make the point. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul expresses thanks for their being "*enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge*" (1 Corinthians 1:5) – a reference to their receiving spiritual gifts which was a major focus of his letter (chapters 12-14). For the Philippians, Paul thanked God for their "*partnership in the gospel*" (1:5). In 4:15, Paul notes that the Philippians were the only ones to financially assist him at one point in his career. Thus, Paul gives a prelude to his message within the prayer of thanksgiving at the beginning of his letter.

In four of the letters that Paul wrote, two to congregations (Galatians and 2 Corinthians) and two to an individual (1 Timothy and Titus), he omitted the thanksgiving prayer after the prescript. It seems obvious why Paul omitted it in this letter to the Galatians. He had just heard disturbing news and he was writing to quickly address their digression. He clearly was not thankful for their current status. It is not so obvious why Paul omitted the thanksgiving prayer in 2 Corinthians. Following the prescript, Paul does offer a praise to God (see below on Doxologies), so it may not reflect any bad feelings Paul had for the Corinthians. Paul's first letter to Timothy is unusual in that the thanksgiving prayer does not follow the prescript (but which was not unusual for Hellenistic letters [Neste, 90]), and the object of the prayer is Paul himself and not Timothy. However, Timothy and Titus were valued associates, so much so, that a thanksgiving prayer was probably unnecessary for them to have that assurance.

The Thanksgiving Prayers of Paul's Letters	
<i>Romans</i>	"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you."
<i>1 Corinthians</i>	"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge – even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."
<i>2 Corinthians</i>	
<i>Galatians</i>	
<i>Ephesians</i>	"For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come."
<i>Philippians</i>	"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now... And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."
<i>Colossians</i>	"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven... And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."
<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	"We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."
<i>2 Thessalonians</i>	"We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing."
<i>1 Timothy</i>	"I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, ..."
<i>2 Timothy</i>	"I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day."

The Thanksgiving Prayers of Paul's Letters (continued)	
<i>Titus</i>	
<i>Philemon</i>	"I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ."

The Closing of New Testament Letters

The closing of ancient Greek letters typically contained a second health wish or a "*farewell*" (Gk. *eroso*; see Acts 15:29). New Testament letters also had a formal closing that consisted of one or more of the following basic elements (see the chart on page 4-4 for which components occur in each letter):

- Peace Wish
- Greetings sent by Companions of the Author
- Greetings sent to Friends of the Author via the Recipient
- Benediction (Grace)

Only James and 1 John have no closing elements in their letters. It is hard to know what to make of that especially when we know that the opening and closing elements of a letter were sometimes removed when placed in a collection of letters.

Peace Wish

A peace wish at the closing of a letter was a common element of a Jewish letter. The peace wish was expressed in two ways: either that the God of peace be with the recipient (e.g. Rom 15:33), or that God extend peace to the recipient (e.g. Eph 6:23). Paul includes a peace wish in most of his congregational letters, but never in his letters to individuals.

Greetings

The greetings usually come between the peace wish and the benediction. Only in Romans do the greetings (the bulk of chapter 16) follow the benediction (15:33). Some see this as support for their contention that chapter 16 was added to the Roman letter at a later date.

It was common for an author to send greetings from others who are with the author. In the case of Paul's letters, these greetings would have been from Paul's traveling companions or from Christians in the area from which Paul was writing. In addition, it was commonplace for an author to ask the recipient to pass along greetings to other acquaintances. In Christian correspondence this sometimes included the extension of a 'holy kiss'. A greeting kiss was a common practice in both Greek and Jewish society.

Paul did not include greetings in his letter to the Ephesians which may support the contention that it was intended as a circular letter to multiple churches. His omission of greetings in his letter to the Galatians was probably for the same reason he omitted the thanksgiving; his concern for their digression was uppermost in his mind.

Benediction

All of Paul's letters contain a benediction of the form: "*grace be with you.*" If specified, it is the grace of the "*Lord Jesus Christ*" that Paul is praying to be granted. Just like his opening salutations, Paul often couples "*peace*" and "*grace*" in his closings.

Doxologies

Another common feature of New Testament letters is the inclusion of doxologies. A *doxology* is simply an expression of *praise* (Gk. *eulogetos*: praise, blessed) *to God* or the assigning of *glory* (Gk. *'doxa'*) *to God*. Doxologies often occur in the *Closing*, but are also found in the *Opening* or the *Body* of the letter. New Testament doxologies typically begin with "*Blessed be the God...*" (e.g. 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3) or contain the three basic elements "*to whom (God) / be glory / forever. Amen*" (Rom 11:36).

The Closing of New Testament Letters					
	<i>Peace Wish</i>	<i>Greetings From Companions</i>	<i>Greetings to Friends</i>	<i>Benediction (Grace)</i>	<i>Doxology</i>
<i>Romans</i>	15:33	16:21-23	16:3-16 <i>hk</i>	16:20	11:36; 16:27
<i>1 Corinthians</i>		16:19-20a	16:20b-21 <i>hk</i>	16:23	
<i>2 Corinthians</i>	16:11	16:13	16:12 <i>hk</i>	16:14	1:3
<i>Galatians</i>	6:16			6:18	1:5
<i>Ephesians</i>	6:23			6:24	1:3; 3:21
<i>Philippians</i>	4:9	4:22	4:21	4:23	4:20
<i>Colossians</i>		4:10-14	4:15,18	4:18b	
<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	5:23		5:26 <i>hk</i>	5:28	
<i>2 Thessalonians</i>	3:16			3:18	
<i>1 Timothy</i>				6:21b	1:17
<i>2 Timothy</i>		4:21	4:19	4:22b	4:18
<i>Titus</i>		3:15a	3:15b	3:15c	
<i>Philemon</i>		v.23-24		v.25	
<i>Hebrews</i>	13:20	13:24b	13:24a	13:25	X 13:21
<i>James</i>					
<i>1 Peter</i>	5:14b	5:13	5:14a <i>hk</i>		1:3; 4:11
<i>2 Peter</i>					3:18
<i>1 John</i>					
<i>2 John</i>		v.13			
<i>3 John</i>	v.15a	v.15b	v.15c		
<i>Jude</i>					v.24-25
<i>Revelation</i>				22:21	1:5-6

hk = Greeting includes the extending of a "holy kiss".

Lesson 5

The Writing, Delivery, and Reading of Letters

The writing of a letter and having it delivered was a difficult and uncertain process, and the cost was not insignificant.

The Writing of a Letter

The literacy rate in the ancient world is uncertain¹. Even if one were able to read, the ability to write with the available materials could still be difficult. Consequently, it was commonplace to hire a professional secretary, also called a scribe or an *amanuensis*, to actually write the letter. Thus, a distinction needs to be made between the author of the letter and the writer of the letter.

As a minimum, the secretary would write the letter as it was dictated by the author. Since ancient writing was tedious considering the writing materials available, simple dictation could take a great deal of effort and time. The process could be streamlined slightly by first writing a draft of the letter on a wax tablet. Without the need to continually ink the pen, the dictation process was somewhat smoother.

However, there is considerable evidence that there was a Latin shorthand system of writing that some secretaries were skilled in using during dictation, and it has been argued that a Greek shorthand system of writing was also available in the first century; we know there was Greek shorthand in the 2nd century [Reece, 14]. But even if this was the case, it is unknown how widely this skill was practiced and whether such skilled secretaries would have been available for the New Testament writers. We simply do not know.

We do know that Paul used secretaries for some of his letters, and perhaps all. The letter to the Romans was written by Tertius, a Christian: "*I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord*" (16:22). Reece notes that "there are many ancient analogues for the practice of a scribe inserting his own name and greeting into a letter [41, Note 1]. Peter may have used Silvanus (a Latinized form of "*Silas*") as a secretary (1 Pet 5:12), but the language is ambiguous and could be understood to mean that Silas was the messenger who delivered the letter for Peter or, even, that Silas composed the letter at Peter's direction [see Hamilton, *1 Peter*, for a discussion].

In three of his letters, Paul uses this same phrase: "*I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand*" (1 Cor 16:21, Col 4:18, and 2 Thess 3:17). In two other letters he includes a similar statement "*with his own hand*" (Gal 6:11 and Phlm 19). This suggests that a secretary wrote the letter except for the final greeting which Paul penned himself. Weima suggests this was a common ancient practice which gave authenticity to the letter [643].

Paul explicitly makes this connection in 2 Thessalonians 3:17: "*I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.*" Undoubtedly, the reason Paul points to the genuineness of his letter is that apparently there were fake letters being circulated in his name (2:2). Taking Paul at his word that this was

¹ Witherington [*Living Word*, 2] understands the ancient world to be primarily an oral culture, so he believes the literacy rate for men in NT times was probably between 10% and 20%. Evans [*Jesus and His World*, 66] agrees with this rate, which is somewhat surprising since he presents a great amount of archaeological evidence that seemingly would suggest a higher literacy rate. On the other hand, Millard, presenting evidence of the same sort as Evans, believes in a higher literacy rate in both the OT (e.g. "... a strong case can be made for widespread literacy during the Israelite monarchy" ["Question of Israelite Literacy," 147]) and NT periods (e.g. "...writing and reading were widely practiced in the Palestine of Jesus' day" ["Literacy in the Time of Jesus"]).

his normal practice means that Paul typically used a secretary and only personally penned the greeting (see also Col 4:18). The letter to the Galatians may have been an exception. In Galatians 6:11, Paul writes “*See with what large letters I am writing you with my own hand.*” Since this occurs near the letter’s closing, it may have reference only to the closing, but it could have reference to the entire letter. In any case, Paul does seem to have written the whole of his letter to Philemon (Phlm 19).

Making a Record Copy of a Letter

Murphy-O'Connor claims that it was the “normal practice” in Roman times for a copy to be made of a letter before it was sent [12-13; also Richards, 156-161]. The copy would have been made by the author or his secretary and would be available for future reference. Whether this was the practice of New Testament authors is unknown. It has been imagined that if Paul, for example, did keep a copy of his various letters then that could explain how a collection of Paul’s letters were made and distributed among the churches at a fairly early date.

Letter Carriers

Augustus established a postal system throughout the Roman empire that consisted of “relay stations placed (in Latin, “placed” is *positum*, from which our word “post” is derived) at appropriate intervals” [Achteimer, et.al., 274], but it was only available for official mail or military dispatches. Wealthy individuals could use their slaves to transport letters. It has been suggested that when Paul refers to “*Chloe’s people*” as the source of his information about the Corinthians quarreling among themselves, he may be referring to Chloe’s slaves [Bruce, *1&2 Corinthians*, 32; Richards, 181]. Ordinary people desiring to send a letter had to rely on the goodwill of friends (as Paul seems to have relied on Phoebe for delivery of his letter to the Romans, Rom 16:1-2) or, perhaps, strangers to deliver their letters.

The letter carrier may also have been given the charge to deliver an oral message in addition to the letter. For example, Paul’s sends his letter to the Ephesians and Colossians by Tychicus and, presumably, Onesimus (Eph 6:21; Col 4:7-9), and says that they would be able to give additional information about his current condition. Since Paul was most likely in prison when he sent those letters, it is understandable that the Christians in Ephesus and Colossae would be very concerned about Paul’s welfare.

Paul’s correspondence with the church at Corinth illustrates the issues involved with the sending of letters (see the chart on page 5-4). In 1 Corinthians, Paul mentions that he sent a previous letter and it appears that he has heard that they misunderstood his instruction so he is writing to correct their understanding (5:9-11). Nothing is told us of who carried his previous letter to them, nor are we specifically told how Paul heard of their misunderstanding. However, we do know that regarding another matter he had heard news from Chloes’ people (who apparently lived in Corinth; 1:11) and, based on Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians, Paul received a letter from Corinth asking him several questions (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1) that was apparently carried to him by Stephanas, Fortunantus, and Achaicus (16:17). 1 Corinthians is the letter where Paul answers their questions and corrects their misunderstanding and may have been carried back to Corinth by Stephanas, etc. Between the sending of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, Paul makes a quick visit to Corinth (not recorded by Luke) and writes them a ‘severe’ letter that was probably delivered by Titus. 2 Corinthians then is the letter that Paul writes when he hears from Titus of the Corinthians’ good response to his severe letter. Such correspondence would take months!

The Reading of Letters

The majority of the New Testament letters are written to congregations. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul indicates that it was his desire that the letter be read to the congregation (1 Thess 5:27). In the case of his letter to the Colossians, Paul either assumed that his letter would be publicly read, or, more probably, had made arrangements for its public reading (4:16).

“As far as we can tell, no documents in antiquity were intended for ‘silent’ reading, and only a few were intended for private individuals to read. They were always meant to be read out loud, usually to a group of people. For the most part, they were simply necessary surrogates for oral communication. This was particularly true of ancient letters.” [Witherington, *What’s in the Word*, 8]

This is consistent with Paul’s practice of addressing his letter to the “*brothers*”. Besides the practical consideration that a public reading of the letters would be the easiest way for all to hear the letter’s content, a public reading would also be the most effective way of promoting the author’s intent. Whether it is the mutual exhortation of the brethren or the desire that they act in unity, a public reading puts all on notice of their duty.

The Sharing of Letters

Whether New Testament authors understood that their letters would be available for us today can be debated, Paul at least desired that others besides the named recipients have the opportunity to read his letters. Considering again Paul’s letter to the Colossians as an example, he clearly asks the Colossians to share his letter to them with the neighboring Christians in Laodicea, and in like manner, that the Colossians read the letter that Paul had sent to the Laodiceans (Col 4:15-16).

Some see Peter’s reference to “*all [Paul’s] letters*” (2 Pet 3:16) as suggesting that Paul’s letters were already circulating as a collection at this time. Even if Paul did not keep a copy of his letters as some has suggested, the fact that churches shared Paul’s letters could equally well explain how a collection of Paul’s letters was made at an early date.

Paul's Contact with the Church at Corinth

Visits

First Visit – 2nd Missionary Journey (Acts 18)

Second ('Painful') Visit (?)
(2 Cor 2:1; 12:14; 13:1)

Last (Third?) Visit – 3rd Missionary Journey (Acts 20:2; cf. 2 Cor 12:14; 13:1)

Correspondence

Sent

'Previous Letter' (1 Cor 5:9)

Paul Sends Timothy Toward Corinth
(Acts 19:22; 1 Cor 4:17; 16:10)
Unknown if he gets there or not.

1 Corinthians – Sent from Ephesus; Possibly delivered by Stephanas, etc.
(1 Cor 16:8, 15-19)

'Severe Letter' (?) (2 Corinthians 2:4; 7:8)
Probably taken by Titus from Ephesus
(2 Cor 2:12-13)

2 Corinthians - Sent from Macedonia
(2 Cor 7:5; 8:1; 9:2, 4). Timothy is with Paul (2 Cor 1:1).

Received

News From Chloe's Household
(1 Cor 1:11)

Letter From Church at Corinth
(1 Cor 7:1; Possibly delivered by Stephanas, etc. – 1 Cor 16:17)

Heard From Titus of Good Response to 'Severe Letter'
(2 Cor 7:6ff)

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