

Paul as a Letter Writer Dr. Mitchell Reddish

One of the most distinctive aspects

In NT, 13 letters considered to be by Paul (14 if Hebrews)

Undisputed

Possibly

Likely not

Reasons

Vocabulary

Writing style (Ephesians)

Theological views (women)

Historical Development of church (church offices)

Also wrote other letters (lost letter in 1 Corinthians; if statement in Colossians is correct, letter to the Laodiceans)

Occasional writings

Deal with specific problems or local issues

Not all of Paul's thoughts

One side of a conversation

Typically Paul's letters follow the usual pattern of Greco-Roman letters of his time.

Like we have set ways to write letters –business letter or friendly (informal) letter.

Opening (name of sender, recipient, greeting)

Thanksgiving or prayer

Body

Conclusion, with final wishes/exhortations/greetings

We know how letters were written because some letters were preserved and passed on as literature (letters of Plato, Cicero, Pliny). Reflect educated upper-class. What about ordinary letters? Fortunately, in the late 19th and early 20th century, thousands of letters were discovered, mostly in Egypt, many of them in ancient trash piles, such as at Oxyrhynchus south of Memphis. Oxyrhynchus was an amazing find—biblical texts, non-biblical Christian and Jewish writings, writings of ancient authors (Hesiod, Plato, Sappho), and common, everyday documents (business transactions, deeds, court proceedings, and private letters).

Example of a letter.

Example of a Roman Letter

Letter from Apion

(2nd century C.E. - Egypt)

Apion to Epimachus, his father and lord, very many greetings. Before all else I pray for your health and that you may always be well and prosperous, together with my sister and her daughter and my brother. I thank the lord Serapis that when I was in danger at sea he straightway saved me. On arriving at Misenum I received from Caesar three gold pieces for travelling expenses. And it is well with me. Now I ask you, my lord and father, write me a letter, telling me first of your welfare, secondly of my brother's and sister's, and enabling me thirdly to make obeisance before your handwriting, because you educated me well and I hope thereby to have quick advancement, if the gods so will. Give many salutations to Capiton and my brother

and sister and Serenilla and my friends. I have sent you by Euctemon a portrait of myself. My name is Antonius Maximus, my company the Athenonica. I pray for your health. (Postscript) Serenus son of Agathodaemon salutes you, and . . . , and Turbo son of Gallonius, and . . .

(Addressed) To Philadelphia, to Epimachus from Apion his son. (Additional address) Deliver at the camp of the first cohort of the Apameni to Julianus, vice-secretary, this letter from Apion to be forwarded to his father Epimachus.

Paul both adopted and adapted Greco-Roman letters

Opening

ID of sender expanded:

Galatians “Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead)

Romans 1:1-6 –“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.”

Compare that to the very short ID in 1 Thess. –“Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy”

Why the differences? 1 Thess. is typical of Greco-Roman letters. Galatians and Romans expanded. In Galatians, defended himself. In Romans, identifying himself to a congregation he had never visited.

Greeting – typical greeting was a simple *chairein* in Greek, translated as “Greetings.” Paul changes this. In a play on words in Greek Paul doesn’t say *chairein*, but *charis*, which is grace. So Paul adds a theological depth to the greeting in his letter. He expands the greeting even further. He adds to the word grace the word “peace,” or *eirēnē*, the Greek word for the Hebrew term, Shalom. Grace to you and peace. In all the undisputed letters of Paul, with the exception of 1 Thessalonians, he fills that out even more: Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Thanksgiving/Prayer

Often in Greco-Roman letters very brief, “I give thanks to the gods for my safe travel.” In Paul, often very lengthy. Furthermore, frequently contain a preview of the major theme or ideas of the letter. For example, listen to the opening of 2 Corinthians:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.”

Can you tell what one of the major themes of 2 Cor. is? Consolation or comfort. Paul apparently wrote this letter after a bad experience at Corinth, what he called a “painful visit,” follow-up by a harsh letter he wrote to the church there. After hearing from Titus, who had taken

the letter to Corinth, that the problems between Paul and Corinth had been resolved, then Paul wrote a follow-up letter to patch things up—this letter of consolation or comfort.

Only one letter with no thanksgiving—Galatians.

Body –Advice, instructions, express thanks, deal with problems in the church, travel plans. In 1 Corinthians, we know that Paul is replying to a letter they had written to him (1 Cor. 7:1, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote)

Ethical section or advice—Can occur any place in letter, Paul often has a special section at the end of his letter with special words of instruction, ethical teachings, or advice.

Closing – peace with greetings, further instructions, or a benediction.

A good example is 1 Thess. 5:12-28. The closing begins with Paul urging the believers to maintain good relations within the congregation, along with other exhortations. He then says, “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. Beloved, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

These letters were likely written on papyrus, a paper-like product made from the papyrus plant, probably with a charcoal-based ink. Leather scrolls were also used, but not for everyday affairs. They were too expensive.

Paul sometimes, or maybe even always used a scribe or secretary.

Rom. 16:22 – “I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.”

That’s likely why he comments at the end of Galatians

Gal. 6:11 – “See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!”

and then at the end of 1 Corinthians.

1 Cor. 16:21 – “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand”

He picks up the pen and writes the closing himself.

Philemon 19, “I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand.”

How was letter dictated—how much freedom did secretary have.

Here’s a photo of a Greek manuscript showing the end of Ephesians and the opening of Galatians. This manuscript is called p46 or papyrus 46, because it is a papyrus manuscript. This is one of the most important ancient copies of Paul’s letters that we possess. Dating from the late second or the early third century, it is our earliest copy of Paul’s letters. If we look at this letter, we can see how Paul’s opening is similar to Greek letters. The first highlighted portion reads, “Paul the apostle.” The second reads, “To the churches of Galatia;” and the third highlighted portion says, “Grace to you and peace”

Letter folded, name of addressee and city on outside. Usually not specific address, so the person who delivered the letter would have to find the recipient.

How would he send the letters?

There was a postal system, but only for official, government business.

Hire someone, find someone going that way (merchant, traveler), send a friend or associate. Timothy & Titus. Timothy takes 1 Thess. Timothy and Titus (1 & 2 Cor.)

Hope the letters arrive.

When the letters did arrive, they would have been read aloud as the church was gathered for worship. Few people could read or write, so reading them aloud was a necessity. We need to keep that in mind when we are reading Paul’s letters today. We are used to studying them carefully, examining each part of the sentences as we interpret them. The original recipients of these letters would not have had that luxury. They would encounter the letters as oral products read to them, likely all at one sitting.

Paul's letters seem to have all been written in the decade between 50 and 60 C.E., which makes them, by the way, the earliest written materials we have in the New Testament. The earliest Gospel to be written was the Gospel of Mark, written sometime around 70 C.E. So, all the letters of Paul were written before any of the Gospels were written.

How did they end being collected and preserved? Some have suggested that Paul may have kept copies of some or all of his letters and that that collection formed the basis of the collection his letters. That's not a strange an idea as it may at first sound. We do know that some ancient writers kept their letters and published them (such as the letters Pliny the Younger wrote to the Emperor Trajan, along with Trajan's letters back to him). More likely, however, is that individual churches began to circulate their letters among themselves and eventually they were gathered together and preserved.

Even though Paul did not start out to write scripture—he didn't say "I've got to be careful, this is going to be in the Bible one day!"—his letters were most certainly preserved and passed down because the early Christians valued these letters for their sage advice, their helpful instructions, and their deep theological insight. In the end, the church said, we hear the voice of God still speaking through these letters and they need to be shared with believers everywhere. If you are wondering why Paul's letters are arranged in the order in which we have them in our New Testament, they appear to have been intentionally arranged by grouping first the letters written to congregations, followed by letters addressed to individuals. Then within each of those groupings, they were arranged in terms of the letters' lengths, longest to shortest.