

EPISTOLARY RESEARCH¹

Bibliographical Overview

The bibliography is intended to supply you with basic tools either of a generalized nature covering the field in its entirety, or of specific subtopics within the field which are relevant to paper assignments or else to the research field itself.

Some brief observations concerning major sources are in order. First, works on this tend to fall into two or three categories: (1) those which focus on the surrounding history of letter writing in the ancient world and on secondarily treat the New Testament phenomena; (2) those which reverse this focus usually with major attention on Paul; (3) also those which are in fact source books of noncanonical documents without much treatment of methodology or research into this field.

The works which basically fall into the first category described above include those by Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East; Exler; Koskenniemi; Meecham; Stowers (a mixture of categories one and three); Thyn; White, The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter, Studies in Ancient Letter Writing; Winters. Those with major stress on the canonical letters include the publications by Aune; IBD, RLAC and ISBE articles; Doty's writings; Mullins' works; Roller; Schnider and Stenger; White, "NT Epistolary Literature in the Framework of Ancient Epistolography," CBQ article. The source book category is centered on the LCB four volume series, White's Light from Ancient Letters; Malherbe's Moral Exhortation; Winter's book also falls here. A sort of fourth category will be those works which treat some subtopic in epistolary research either in ancient letters generally or more often in the canonical letters. These should be rather evident by title.

Getting into the Field

In regard to the very important starting points for gaining understanding of what is taking place in this field, one should begin with Aune, move to Doty's Letters in Primitive Christianity, proceed on to Schnider and Stenger and then center on Stowers work. These works will provide basic awareness of this field within the parameters of New Testament epistolography. Next, the works which focus on the non-canonical literature should be examined. The temptation to bypass this field of work must be steadfastly resisted, for only in this material can a comparative frame of reference be gleaned which helps place the New Testament epistolary material into proper focus. Study here must include both the primary literature [the

¹Lecture delivered to New Testament Critical Methodology 772 students in PhD seminar at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Also, published in *Exegeting the New Testament: vol 2, Research Updates and Bibliography*, (Scripta Publishing) 1991. All rights reserved.

source books containing both Greek texts as well as English translations] and the secondary literature. No linear procedure at this point can be detailedly set forth; it will inevitably be an interactive process. Awareness of the contents of a large number of the documents is essential to gain a clear sense of emerging patterns which become the point of insight and discussion in the research. The perspectives set forth concerning these demonstrable patterns become then the crucial bridge to application of this research to the epistolary material in the New Testament.² In summary, what is being sketched out here is a process of study which must extend itself over a long period of time in order to reach maximum productivity.³

Overview of the Research⁴

Doty's statement in 1973--"Up to the present time epistolary research has remained scattered and fragmentary."⁵--must still be considered as an unfortunately accurate portrayal of the state of epistolary research in the mid-80's. It should be stressed, however, that the situation is improved somewhat over the 1973 state of research. His work represents a significant turning point which attempted to pull together this highly fragmented research into a more unified, systematic presentation.

Previously the stimulus for much of the work in this field had come from Adolf Deissmann's Licht vom Osten. Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt, first published in 1908. Deissmann, on the cutting edge of the early archaeological discoveries of large numbers of these materials, attempted to relate their importance to New Testament studies at several points: chap. 2--*für das sprachgeschichtliche Verständnis des Neuen Testaments*; chap. 3--*für das literargeschichtliche ...*; chap. 4--*für das kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche ...*; chap. 5--*Rückblick. Die künftigen Aufgaben der Forschung*. With a very broad perspective, Deissmann sought to challenge tradition thinking about the kind of Greek one encounters in the New Testament as well as to draw numerous theological and exegetical

²An additional value of extensive work in these documents is the invaluable insight which they provide into the formation of a social history of this era and culture. Compare White's statement of secondary purpose for the collection of letters in his Light from Ancient Letters, 3: "There are at least two subsidiary purposes, however, which I intend for these sources to serve: (1) they may be used to illuminate broad environmental factors or conditions that aid in understanding Judaism and Christianity in the Graeco-Roman period; and (2) they contribute, in particular, to an understanding of socio-political and economic factors within Egypt itself during the same period."

³This professor must in candor acknowledge that he is only a beginner in this field. Doty's work was a pivotal starting point which has whetted the appetite to pursue extensive readings in the multivolume Loeb Classical Library series. As a side note, one can find in many of these documents very entertaining reading as well as a wealth of sermon illustrations! For example, #137 [1:343-44]: "Aurelius Dios to Aurelius Horion, my sweetest father, many greetings. I make supplication for you every day before the gods of this place. Now do not be uneasy, father, about my studies; I am working hard and taking relaxation; I shall do finely...." Or #159 [1:377]: "...Having had the luck to find someone going up to you I felt obliged to address you. I am much surprised, my son, that till today I have received from you no news of your welfare...."

⁴For one of the few existing surveys of the research history, see Stanley K. Stowers, Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 17-26.

⁵William G. Doty, Letters in Primitive Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), ix.

deductions with this research tool. Some of his work is outdated; some of his goals have proven to be a bit over zealous [For example, the exegetical deductions drawn from his over distinction between letter and epistle for Paul's Letter to the Romans.].⁶ But in spite of some limitations of this early work, his contributions were profound and many have deeply impacted modern scholarship.

Some names surface from Deissmann to the present in this field such as Otto Roller and Paul Schubert in the 20's and 30's, as researchers who sought to work in the more comprehensive perspective set forth by Deissmann as well as occasionally in some subcategory. A few others focused on some smaller perspectives such as Anton Vögtle at Freiburg. With the shift to Formgeschichte in gospel studies during this period, the orientation in epistolary research increasingly gravitated this direction as well, under the limited exploration of Dibelius and a few others into the letter genre. The epistolary form was seen as potentially establishing a literary framework for theological expression. This orientation generally characterizes the thrust of the research done down to present studies.

The 50's and 60's reflect some spasmodic efforts taking place in epistolary research; an example would be that of Hartwig Thyn. Significant stimulus to research in this field in relation to New Testament concerns came in the 70's through the Ancient Epistolography Group in the Society of Biblical Literature.⁷ The list of contributors to this volume in the Semeia series [vol. 22] provides a partial reference to the many who had begun to work in this field by this point. To that list there should be added the names of Reinhard Deichgräber, Francis Exler, Terence Mullins, Beda Rigaux and Jack T. Sanders, for these individuals have made major contributions in the recent scholarly work here. To be sure a major part of this group's effort centered on sifting through the massive world of epistolary literature not only in the surrounding cultures of this general era but also in the semitic roots in Babylonian, Aramaic, Akkadian epistolography. Many of these had to be translated for the first time into English and then studied.

Coming out of this then are the more recent publications, beginning with Doty's, which increasingly focus attention on applying the results of such background, comparative research to the New Testament documents. Quite logically, the Pauline corpus has received the overwhelming amount of attention, since his letters occupy such a significant place in the New Testament canon. Also, since he exerted a profound impact on sub apostolic and later genres in Christian circles. One of the neglected areas of research which is only now beginning to receive some attention is the catholic epistles. How they correspond to both Paul and the surrounding patterns and how they profoundly differ at crucial points is a major field of investigation which needs much greater attention.

The Epistolary Form

⁶Cf. Stowers, 17-21, for helpful critique.

⁷For a helpful historical survey see John L. White, "The Ancient Epistolography Group in Retrospect," in Studies in Ancient Letter Writing, John L. White, ed., 1-14. Note the important bibliography at the end of the chapter.

The common elements shared by both the New Testament letter and the contemporary hellenistic letter include the following:

- Praescriptio (Prescript)
 - Superscriptio (Author/Sender)
 - Adscriptio [Recipient(s)]
 - Salutatio (Greeting)
- Proem (Prayer of Thanksgiving and/or Intercession)
- Body
 - Opening Formulae
 - Request/Appeal
 - Disclosure
 - Expressions of Astonishment
 - Formulae of Compliance
 - Formulae of Hearing/Learning
 - Formulae of Petition
 - Traditions Material
 - From worship liturgy
 - Hymns
 - Confessions of Faith
 - Lord Supper Narratives
 - From early preaching
 - Kerygma
 - Verba Christi
 - Old Testament References
 - Parenesis
 - Lists of Vice/Virtues
 - Haustafeln (Domestic Codes)
 - Gemeindetafeln (Duty Codes)
 - Judgment Form
 - Closing
 - Eschatological Affirmations
 - Travelogue/Apostolic Parousia
- Conclusio (Eschatokoll)
 - Greetings
 - Doxology
 - Benediction

It must be kept in mind that not all of these elements are going to be found in every single letter of this era. But these do represent in general those sections which commonly surface in letters both within and outside the New Testament.

Some general comments will be given on the categories set forth above, with particular attention on those which will not be covered by any of the seminar papers.⁸

Praescriptio. The schema typically found here is A to B, greetings. The sender (=superscriptio, Absender), who assumes responsibility for the contents of the letter, is first identified by name and--especially if some kind of official letter--by position or title.⁹ The latter part becomes important by way of establishing legitimate credentials of authority for any demands or instructions contained in the letter. The term author perhaps should be only cautiously related here. The common use of an amanuensis clouds the issue of authorship designation in a precise definition. The methodology of the pattern of dictation of the contents of the letter could vary from a strict dictation of detailed contents to the sketching out of general points which the amanuensis would fill in the details. The use of such an individual by Paul is clearly reflected in his letters: Tertius identifies himself as such in Rom. 16:22; the reference to taking pen in hand in the closing sections of many of Paul's letters (1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; cf. Philm. 19) reflects a widely used formulaic signal that an amanuensis has composed the contents up to this point and now the one ultimately responsible for the contents finishes the letter in his own recognizable handwriting as a seal of verification of the preceding contents.

The recipient(s) (=Adscriptio, Empfänger) designates the individual or group to whom the letter was sent.¹⁰ In the case of the Pauline corpus these are mostly church groups; only 1,2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon are addressed to individuals. In the case of the catholic epistles, where the epistolary praescriptio is found, the addressees are usually designated as Christians generally without any narrowly defined geographical location indicated--thus the label 'catholic' [universal] epistles. At least once in the Pauline corpus there is suggestion of another variation--that of a circular letter. Interestingly, the textual tradition for the adscriptio section of Ephesians reflects a high level of uncertainty for the geographical designation ἐν Ἐφέσῳ (1.1). This very likely corresponds to a pattern found outside the New Testament where this geographical designation would be left blank, to be orally filled in by the one who carried the letter to place to place and read it before an assembled group. Thus as the letter was read in different localities the geographical designation would be appropriately changed by the reader.

The greeting (=salutatio, Eingangsgrußwunsch) in the hellenistic letter was usually the independent infinitive χαίρειν.¹¹ Such occurs in the New Testament only in three places: James 1.1; Acts 15.23, 23.26. This reflects the oral greeting made when meeting another person as reflected in 2 John 10-11.¹² The

⁸For charting of these basic elements in Paul with a slightly different structure see Doty, 43.

⁹See Franz Schnider and Werner Stenger, Studien zum neutestamentlichen Briefformular (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), 5-6, for helpful chart of the Pauline pattern for the superscriptio.

¹⁰Ibid., 16-17, for pauline adscriptio chart.

¹¹For detailed treatment see Terence Mullins, "Greeting as a New Testament Form," Journal of Biblical Literature 87 (1968): 418-26.

¹²ἐν τις ἔρχεται πρὸς υμᾶς καὶ ταύτην τὴν διδασχὴν οὐ φέρει, μὴ λαμβάνετε αὐτὸν εἰς οἰκίαν καὶ χαίρειν αὐτῷ μὴ λέγετε· οὐ λέγων γὰρ αὐτῷ χαίρειν κοινωνεῖ τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτοῦ τοῖς πονηροῖς.

modification of this customary hellenistic pattern by Paul typically employs the noun χάρις from the same stem but with heavy theological orientation and εἰρήνη from the Hebrew עִשְׁוּן. The precise Sitz im Leben for his pattern is debated.¹³ The catholic epistle adherence to this Pauline pattern is noticeable but with some variations.¹⁴

Proem. This part of the Pauline letter has received considerable attention beginning with the work of Paul Schubert in the 30's.¹⁵ The hellenistic background often combined or else closely associated this prayer with the greeting so that the prayer became a health wish. The Pauline expansion builds on this in the direction of thanksgiving for distinctive aspects in his recipients and then typically moves into a petitionary prayer in behalf of his readers. As Schubert first noted and has been reaffirmed by subsequent research, this section in Paul additionally functions very often as a "sort of shorthand indicator of the contents" of many of his letters.¹⁶ Galatians is the single omission of this; in its place comes the propositio which in the legal background of polemical texts sets forth in summary fashion Paul's contention with the Galatians and becomes the launch pad into the body of the letter. The Sitz im Leben for the Proem was earlier identified with Paul's preaching; he began his preaching in a similar manner and thus carried it over into his writing. More recently the close correspondence of the thanksgiving aspect especially with Hellenistic-Jewish formulae of thanks and praise has convinced most scholars that the liturgical background of introductory prayers in Christian worship supply the background source for these prayers.¹⁷

Body Opening Formulae. Generally having the least amount of attention the body of the letter is the most pivotal section of the letters in the New Testament. Jack Sanders and John L. White especially have done helpful research into signals which begin the body proper of the Pauline letters against their parallels in the hellenistic pattern. The alternative patterns include the following:

¹³Ibid., 25-26.

¹⁴Jas. 1.1 χάρειν

1 Pet. 1.2 χάρις υμῶν καὶ εἰρήνη πληθυνθεῖη

2 Pet. 1.2 χάρις υμῶν καὶ εἰρήνη πληθυνθεῖη ἐν ἐπιγνώσει τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν

2 Jn. 3 ἔσται μεθ' ἡμῶν χάρις ἁλως εἰρήνη παρὰ θεοῦ πατρὸς, καὶ παρὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ υιοῦ τοῦ πατρὸς, ἐν ἀληθείᾳ καὶ ἀγάπῃ

Jude 2 ἁλως υμῶν καὶ εἰρήνη καὶ ἀγάπη πληθυνθεῖη

¹⁵For a helpful comparative analysis see Eduard Lohse, Colossians and Philemon, trans. W. R. Poehlmann and R. J. Karris (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 12-13. For very helpful detailed current treatment with bibliography see Schnider and Stenger, 42-49. See page 42 for chart listing of Pauline patterns.

¹⁶Doty, 32.

¹⁷For detailed treatment see James M. Robinson, "Die Hodajot-Formel in Gebet und Hymnus des Frühchristentums," in Aphophoreta: Festschrift für Ernst Haenchen, ed. W. Eltester and F. H. Kettler (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann 1964), 194-235. For survey see Doty, 31-33.

1. Formulae of request or appeal.
 παρακαλῶ υμᾶς...ἵνα... (1 Cor. 1.10)
 ...παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου... (Philm. 8ff)
2. Formulae of disclosure.
 οὐ θέλω υμᾶς αγνοεῖν... (Rom. 1.13; 2 Cor. 1.8)
 αὐτοὶ οὐδατε ... (2 Thess. 2.1)
 γινώσκειν υμᾶς βούλομαι... (Phil. 1.12)
 γνωρίζω υμῖν ... (Gal. 1.11)
3. Others which may signal the beginning of the body proper include expressions of joy, astonishment, statements of compliance (alluding to previous correspondence) and/or learning/hearing and formulae of petition.

There is a great deal of difficulty with nailing these down with precision simply because a lot of variety exists just within the Pauline corpus.¹⁸ Yet those which occur with frequency both within and without the Pauline corpus can be seen as signals of topic introductions and shifts in topics.

Traditions Material. These elements have increasingly become recognized as the sources which the letters in the New Testament draw upon for instruction and affirmation of viewpoint. The organizing frame of reference listed above represents my own efforts to give some systematic structure to the elements. The two major sources from which materials seem to have been derived relate closely to patterns of worship and apostolic preaching--the very center of early Christian congregational life.

Doty, 55-63, discusses the formal elements within the body proper around the following subdivisions: (1) Autobiography, (2) Apocalyptic, (3) Catalogues and Lists, (4) Catechesis, (5) Confessional Formulae, (6) Hymnic Materials, (7) Judgment. In so doing he underscores that this does not represent a highly systematic approach. He goes on to suggest that “an adequately comprehensive treatment of all these materials is yet to be published” (Doty 1973 63). This need still exists some fifteen years later.

Parenesis.¹⁹ With increased focus on the moral exhortation sections of the Pauline letters, Paul has been increasingly seen as a “contextualist theologian and ethicist rather than as a dogmatic moralist.”²⁰ From the beginning work of Dibelius in From Tradition to Gospel, 233-65, in this area down to the present extensive research taking place, the role of the Jewish synagogue homily in the variety of subforms here has

¹⁸For listing of the difficulties see Doty, 34.

¹⁹Variouly spelled as paranesis; paraeneis; Paränese.

²⁰Doty, 37.

become apparent.²¹ The above subcategories list the major types of these materials. Also important here is the realization of the similarities and differences of the biblical materials to the surrounding moral philosophies such as Stoicism which contain many of the identical moral injunctions as found in the New Testament. Comparative analysis can certainly cast much light on the way the apostolic preaching confronted its culture.

Body Closing Formulae. These signals of the closing of the body proper of the letter focus especially in Paul on the Travelogue²² and on Eschatological Affirmations²³ which often come at the end of sub-topics within the body as well as at the end of the body proper. Funk's work on the apostolic presence as a major emphasis in the travelogue pericopes has shown that Paul has taken over one of the three central aspects to a hellenistic letter: the establishment through a letter of an authoritative presence.²⁴

Conclusio.²⁵ The formal closing of the hellenistic letter usually contained two or three basic elements: a wish for the good health of the recipient; a word of farewell; (later beginning in Augustus reign) a closing greeting preceding the first two.²⁶ Paul and the New Testament shows the greatest degree of adaptability at this point with this segment. The greetings section is frequently present, but in addition there are found benedictions and/or doxologies which replace the health wish. These tend to reflect, as Rigaux noted, the Jewish berakah (blessing formulae) similar to that which appears in the proem section.²⁷ Further form critical work by Robert Jewett argues also for the liturgical background of these materials.²⁸ Some additional elements found in the conclusio include the "large letters" personal handwriting of the sender as verification²⁹ and the "holy kiss greeting".³⁰

²¹Especially see Hartwig Thyn, Der Stil der jüdisch-hellenistischen Homilie (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955).

²²Rom. 15.14-33; Philm. 21f.; 1 Thess. 2.17-3.13; 2 Cor. 12.14-13.13; also cf. 1 Cor. 4.14-21; Gal. 4.12-20; Phil. 2.19-24.

²³Rom. 8.31-39, 11.25-36; 1 Cor. 4.6-13; 2 Cor. 6.1ff, Gal. 6.7-10; Phil. 2.14-18; 1 Thess. 2.13-16.

²⁴Doty, 36; Robert W. Funk, "The Apostolic Parousia: Form and Significance," in Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox, ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule and R. Niebuhr (Cambridge: University Press, 1967).

²⁵-67, who list three basic elements: Grußauftrag (command to give greetings), Grußausrichtung (greetings passed on to recipients); Eschatokoll containing Christologischer Schlußgruß and Eigenhändigkeitsvermerk und Namensunterschrift ("Large Letters"). Although I disagree with the structure, their discussion is one of the most important *detailed* recent treatments in print!

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²⁶See White, Studies, 95.

²⁷Beda Rigaux, The Letters of St. Paul: Modern Studies, ed. and trans. by Stephen Yonick (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1962), 131-32.

²⁸Robert Jewett, "The Form and Function of the Homiletic Benediction," Anglican Theological Review 51 (1969): 19-23.

²⁹See Doty, 40-41, for helpful treatment of patterns and methods of dictation in ancient world.

Doty, 42-47, draws some helpful conclusions regarding the epistolary form especially as found in the Pauline corpus: **(1)** the Pauline letters are briefer and less stereotyped in phraseology than hellenistic letters; **(2)** the letter form developed in the Pauline letters was richer than either the brief private letters or the more developed letter-essays of Hellenism; **(3)** Paul was concerned with the life situations of the addressees, but never in the impersonal way characteristic of hellenistic letters; **(4)** Paul wrote as a specifically empowered leader of the community of faith, but not in the capricious or arbitrary claim of authority as can be found in Epicurus or Apollonius for example; **(5)** the Pauline letters were at best a makeshift substitute for his presence with his recipients; **(6)** the language and style of Paul's letters reflect neither the flat, graceless papyrus letters nor the rhetorically polished elements of the treatise or public letter; **(7)** the employment of trusted personal associates as messengers to carry the letters to their destination by Paul reflects tendencies of late-Hellenism but with the distinctive that the "real" message of the sender would be contained within the letter itself, rather than orally entrusted to the messenger--a Pauline pattern that must have enabled the messenger to become the authoritative exegete of the letters once they were read to the addressees; **(8)** the collections of Paul's letters most likely occurred within a decade or so of their composition stimulated by the needs of Christian worship and for practical advice and instruction.

The study of the letter as a distinct genre is significant to clearer exegesis of its contents. The identification of the genre and its subunits (kleine Gattungen) becomes crucial to this interpretative concern. Historical exegesis must begin with the quest for "what did the text mean" and important to that quest is the identification of the literary norms and patterns out of which the New Testament letter emerges.³¹

³⁰Rom. 16.16; 1 Cor. 16.20; 2 Cor. 13.12; 1 Thess. 5.26.

³¹Not covered in this treatment but very important to this concern is the purpose or occasion of the letter and types of letters. For helpful survey of this see David Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 161-69. The types which grow out of specific occasions are:

Private Letters classified by function as letters of

- Request or Petition
- Information
- Introduction
- Order and Instruction
- Family letters
- Business letters

Official Letters

Literary Letters

- Real letters written with no thought of publication
- Real letters written with a broader public in view
- Ideal letters written with publication in view
- Fictional letters using epistolary conventions
- Fictional letters composed for insertion in historical narratives and/or written as rhetorical exercises as

if by some famous person

Letter-essays, treatises with epistolary praescriptio

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