

ἴδετε πηλίκους ὑμῖν
γράμμασιν ἔγραψα τῇ
ἐμῇ χειρὶ

Letters of the New
Testament

“SEE HOW GREAT ARE
THE LETTERS WHICH I WRITE
TO YOU WITH MY OWN
HAND.”

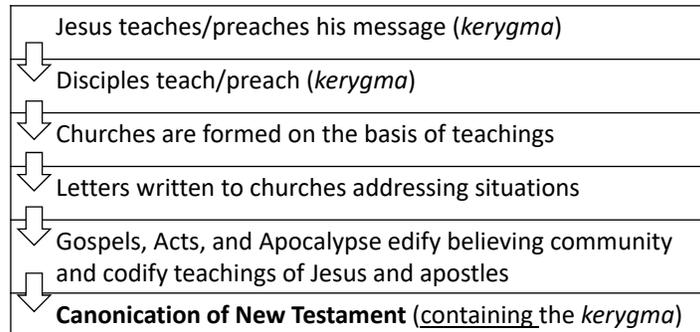
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Getting started

- What is the earliest written material in the New Testament?
- Not Matthew! Paul's Letters
 - First Thessalonians (c. 50 AD)
 - Galatians (c. 53)
 - First Corinthians (c. 53–54)
 - Philippians (c. 55)
 - Philemon (c. 55)
 - Second Corinthians (c. 55–56)
 - Romans (c. 57)

2

How did the New Testament come to be?



- Original gospel message
 - ❖ Communicated orally (*kerygma*)
 - ❖ Written down later; Oral message precedes the text!
- Preserving preached gospel (*kerygma*) alongside written scripture.

3

Special	New Testament Book	Division	
	Matthew	Synoptic Gospels	
	Mark		
	Luke		
Luke-Acts	John	John	
	Acts	Historical	
Johannine Corpus	Romans	Pauline Epistles/Letters	
	1-2 Corinthians		
	Galatians		
	<i>Ephesians</i>		
	Philippians		
	<i>Colossians</i>		
	1-2 Thessalonians		
	1-2 Timothy		Pastoral Letters
	Titus		
	Philemon		
			<i>Hebrews</i>
	James	Catholic / General Epistles	
	1-2 Peter		
	1-3 John		
	Jude		
	Apocalypse of John	Apocalyptic	

4

The Letter Literature

- Most written by Paul (profound influence on Christianity)
 - At least 13/21 NT letters, 13/27 NT books.
- Other letters from early authorities in the Church:
 - Peter, James, John, Jude
 - Letter to the Hebrews – anonymous author; Paul often suggested.
- Each author has his distinct style and theology.
- Some things are called "letters" which read more like sermons or tracts (e.g., Hebrews, James, 1 John)

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The Letter Literature

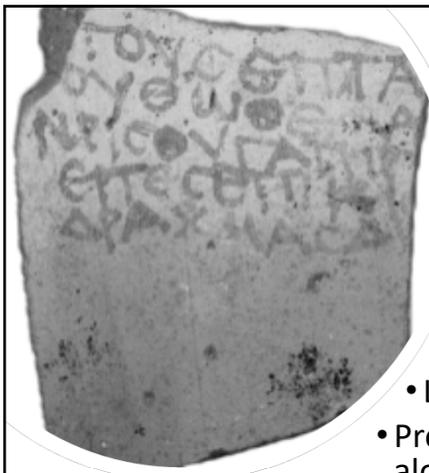
- Communities largely determined content of the letters:
 - What problems were they experiencing?
 - What was the composition of the group (Jewish, Gentile, etc.)
 - What was their background (culture, literature)?
- Letters are the earliest writings in the New Testament
 - important for discussing the beliefs of the early church.

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Only a Selection

- The corpus of NT letters we possess is a selection of all that existed.
- There were other letters that didn't make it in:
 - 1 Corinthians 5:9 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people
 - Colossians 4:16 And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.
- If another letter from an apostle turned up and was authenticated, would we add it to the Bible?

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Technology of Letters

- On clay tablets, pottery shards, papyrus pages
- *amanuensis* = professional secretary
 - Direct dictation, or delegation of a portion of the letter
- Letter carriers and co-senders
- Present letter and read letter aloud
 - Readers know hand-gestures, voice inflection, and volume
 - Represent author and interpret his instructions
 - Audience can ask reader questions about the letter

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Structure and Length of Letters

- Structure:
 - Salutation or Greeting
 - Thanksgiving
 - Body
 - Closing
- Anything missing is worth noting
- Length of Letters
 - Most ancient letters ≈ 90 words
 - Philosophers' letters = 295 words
 - Paul's letters ≈ 1,300 words; Romans: over 7,000 words
 - Philemon – 359 words
- Letter or Epistle? Informal or formal/public?



9

What (and how) do the letters mean?

- "Like many others, I had become accustomed to reading Paul's (and other New Testament) letters as theological treatises, essays on Christian doctrine cast more-or-less incidentally in the form of letters addressed to particular churches." M. Eugene Boring
- How do we take seriously the fact that these materials were truly letters? How does that affect our reading of them?

M. Eugene Boring, review of Lutz Doering's *Ancient Jewish Letters and the Beginnings of Christian Epistolography* in the *Marginalia Review of Books* at <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/m-eugene-boring-on-ancient-jewish-letters-and-the-beginnings-of-christian-epistolography-by-lutz-doering/>

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Rhetoric of Ancient Letters

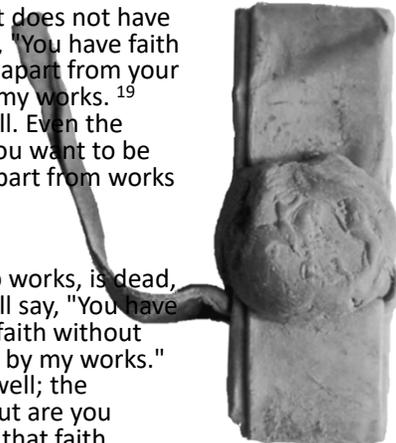
- Letters used when a person cannot be present.
 - Exhortation and Advice
 - Mediation
 - Accusation and Apologetic
- 4 Rhetorical forms:
 - Judicial - rhetoric of the court room, appeals to reason
 - Deliberative – rhetoric of a council of peers, appeals to reason
 - Epideictic - praise and blame, appeals to cultural values
 - Paraenesis - exhortation, advice



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Rhetoric of Ancient Letters

- How rhetoric might help us read better:
 - ^{ESV} James 2:17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe - and shudder! ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?
 - ^{NAS} James 2:17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. ¹⁸ But someone may well say, "You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." ¹⁹ You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. ²⁰ But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?



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Rhetoric of Ancient Letters

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Thoughts on Rhetoric

- Context informs rhetoric
 - what we (may) know about Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, and Colosse greatly sensitizes us to what we find in the letters to those places.
- Getting to the context of a letter may involve "reverse engineering"
 - But that means we start with rhetorically-framed information and work back to what we hope is a legitimate background!
- How do we know we've got it right?
 - Does it offer explanatory power?
 - Are we holding such reconstructions lightly?

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Thoughts on Rhetoric

- Forms and modes of rhetoric depend on location, goals, expectations, and relationships of speaker and audience.
 - "What argumentative aim - what persuasive end - did Paul have in mind?" (Penner & Lopez, "Rhetorical Approaches")
- People don't recognize rhetoric in "objective" sources
 - Our culture: predisposed to value the Bible and its claims
 - But this would not have been true in Paul's communities.
 - We take on faith what letter writers had to persuade people to believe via argument
 - Letter writers argued, many modern Christians just point to the Bible as "proof", but that only works in-group (see Acts 17).

Todd Penner and Davina C. Lopez, "Rhetorical Approaches: Introducing the Art of Persuasion in Paul and Pauline Studies," in Joseph A. Marchal, ed., *Studying Paul's Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012)

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Paul as Scripture

- 1 Cor 11:5-16
 - “not a custom”?
- 1 Corinthians 7
 - Rules regarding marriage
 - Phrasing is challenging:
 - Authoritative phrases:
 - “The rule I lay down”
 - “I give a judgment...I think”
 - But distinguishing authority:
 - “Not I, but the Lord commands...”
 - “I, not the Lord, say...”
 - Why distinguish?



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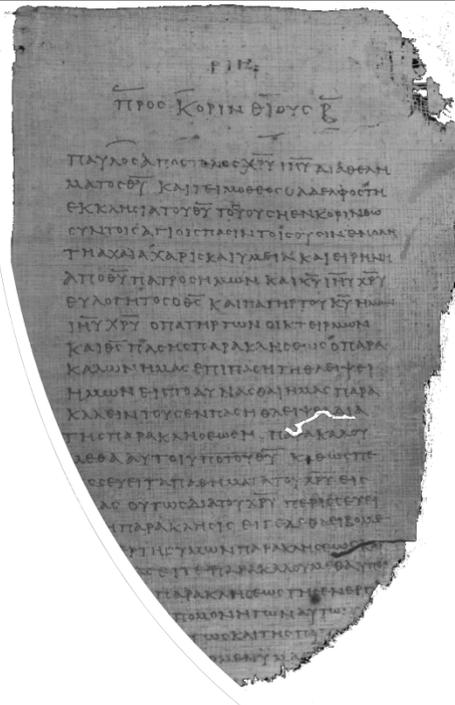
Thoughts on Rhetoric

- Being persuaded means being willing to grant validity to the rhetorician's argument and premises.
 - Evidence as support for rhetoric (1 Cor 15; 1 Cor 2:3-5 and 1 Thess 1:4-5)
- Differing assumptions decreases the effectiveness of rhetoric
- What the ancient world valued is not always what the modern world values.
- Rhetoric is culture-specific:
 - success of a bit of rhetoric will depend on the culture receiving it.
 - Some arguments that we might find ridiculous or unconvincing may be taken as very persuasive in a different cultural context
 - How then should we evaluate the nature of an argument, if its caliber is actually just a reflection of our own culture-bound modes of argumentation?

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Paul's Letters

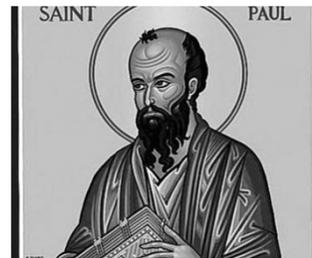
- Very important, But how do we interpret them?
 - Under what conditions were they written?
 - To what extent are they written globally vs. locally?
 - How do moderns apply messages meant for another audience?



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How do we read/interpret Paul?

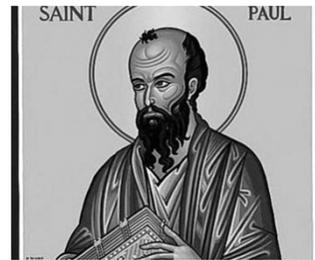
- Global or local?
 - Example: women in leadership:
 - 1 Corinthians 14: women to be silent, not teach men
 - but...
 - Romans 16: Phoebe & Junia, two women leaders



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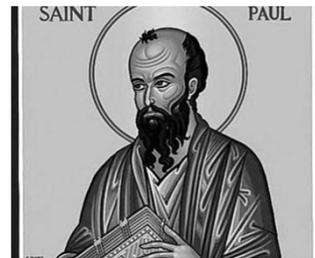
- Global or local?
 - Is Paul responding to a global issue?
 - Establishing a standard at all times and in all places?
 - Or is it a local issue?
 - Establishing a rule for a particular church w/ particular problems?
- Conditionally global?
 - Rules for similar situations when they occur?
 - “This is how to think about and deal with such problems”?



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How do we read/interpret Paul?

- Global or local?
 - Example: women in leadership:
 - Is Paul responding to a global issue?
 - Or is it a local issue?
 - Conditionally global?
- How does context affect interpretation?
 - Does an understanding of specific context change things?
 - Caveat: What role do our own cultural assumptions play?
 - Be aware of agendas in any interpretation!



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