

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 19, Epistle Genre

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In discussing the prophetic genre in the Old Testament, we saw that scholars frequently distinguish between two terms, forth-telling and fore-telling. That's common language you'll find in particularly hermeneutics types or biblical interpretation type textbooks to describe what prophetic literature does. And usually, scholars will emphasize the fact that Old Testament prophecy is primarily forth-telling, or whatever language you want to use to describe that.

That is, the prophets are primarily concerned not with just predicting the future or some course of events that will transpire in the future, though they do that, but they're primarily interested in proclaiming a message to the reader's present situation. And we said that Israel, when the nation of Israel would go off into idolatry and renege on their covenant obligations with God, God would raise up a prophet to call them back to faithfulness to the covenant and to warn them of the consequences of failure to obey the covenant relationship, and even to pronounce judgments on Israel and also the other nations because of their sinfulness. But we did say that the prophets do engage in what some students have called foretelling, that is, promising or anticipating or predicting the future.

We said that at times one needs has to distinguish between the immediate future of the readers on their horizons as opposed to the more distant future, which would be the wrap-up of the cosmos and God's plan for the conclusion of the entire world, often known as eschatology, things related to God's intention for the end. But I've also suggested we need to be aware of speculation as to how prophetic text will be fulfilled and to be aware of the variety of ways we find prophetic text being fulfilled. Sometimes we find prophetic text that in the New Testament get fulfilled in a rather straightforward manner.

We've talked a little bit already about the quotation from Micah chapter 2 or Micah chapter 5 in Matthew chapter 2 where Micah's prophecy of a royal figure being born in Bethlehem seems to be fulfilled in a rather straightforward manner. On the other hand, we see what is sometimes called typological or analogical type of fulfillment where the Old Testament author may not necessarily be predicting a certain event in the distant future, but instead we find in Old Testament text a person or an event or something that gets repeated, something that functions as a type or a pattern that gets picked up and repeated in a greater way in God's dealing with his people in light of fulfillment in Christ. So the conviction being that the same God who is at work fulfilling his promises and bringing about his purposes under the old covenant is likewise in a similar but greater way at work again to fulfill his promises under the new covenant salvation that is inaugurated in the purpose of Jesus Christ.

So again, sometimes you find a very straightforward fulfillment, sometimes you find more analogical or typological type of fulfillment. At times related to that, sometimes you find New Testament text a portraying of fulfillment that seems to be more spiritual that is out not in a straightforward physical or literal way that one finds it portrayed in the Old Testament. For example, in Acts chapter 15, we find these words where in the well-known apostolic council that is or the Jerusalem council where Paul and others are debating the question, what is required for Gentiles to become God's people? Do they have to submit to the Mosaic law or not? And in Acts, we find this quotation justifying the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God.

Verses 16 and also 17, which intriguingly is a quotation from Amos chapter 9 and verse 11 in the Old Testament, which is an anticipation or prediction of the restoration of the Davidic monarchy. And now notice it gets quoted here in Acts chapter 15. After this, I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent, its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it that the remnant of men may seek the Lord and all the

Gentiles who bear the name, says the Lord, who does those things and have been known for ages.

So interestingly, the author seems to find fulfillment of the Amos text anticipating the restoration of the Davidic monarchy and rulership over the nations as already being fulfilled in the inclusion of Gentiles into the one people of God by responding in faith, Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Now, whether that has yet another fulfillment that's more strictly physical in the future is a possibility. But the point is the New Testament authors often find particularly references to restoration of national Israel and the Davidic monarchy with a king ruling over them find that find those prophecies frequently fulfilled in the first coming of Christ and his people, the church.

Another feature of fulfillment when you consider how Old Testament texts get picked up in the New Testament to keep in mind is sometimes you'll find texts that will receive a fulfillment in both the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ as well. That is, certain Old Testament texts that anticipate a future fulfillment get fulfilled, it seems to me, in two stages which correspond to Jesus' first and second coming. That is, at the first coming of Christ, Jesus inaugurates the fulfillment, but at his second coming, he consummates it.

And this is wrapped up in the New Testament understanding of Old Testament fulfillment or New Testament understanding of eschatology. That is, what the Old Testament often anticipated as a final climactic event that would bring the present age to a close and inaugurate a brand new age, that event in the New Testament is frequently seen as split into two parts. One part corresponding to the first coming of Christ that inaugurates it, the second part corresponding to the consummation, the second coming of Christ, which brings it to its conclusion.

So sometimes you need to be aware that prophetic texts will find a fulfillment in both the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ as well. One last thing to say about prophetic literature in terms of fulfillment is, particularly when we are prone to speculate about how something will be fulfilled or whether certain events in our day and age are fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic texts and how close we are to the end in speculation such as that, is I find it instructive to note how fulfillment took place at the first coming of Jesus Christ and how different persons responded to that, particularly how the Jewish leaders found that in fact rejected Christ because they were not prepared for nor did they see prophecy being fulfilled in a way that they expected. So it's almost as if at the first coming of Jesus Christ we find prophecy being fulfilled in a very unexpected way and I wonder that if in some respects that does not provide a model or at least a possibility that God could fulfill things in a unexpected way in the future at his second coming, therefore causing us to be very cautious and avoid speculation as to how this is going to be fulfilled and exactly where and when and what that's going to look like in the same way that God fulfilled his promises and fulfilled Old Testament prophecies in a very unexpected way at the first coming of Christ opens a possibility for him, as some have having some tricks up his sleeve and still having some secrets or still fulfilling things in a way that is very unexpected yet still in clear fulfillment and consistent with the promises and prophecies that he has made.

So be aware of the variety of types of fulfillment when one moves from the Old to the New Testament. Obviously I guess one could add a further type and that is certain prophecies seem to only find fulfillment in the eschatological consummation. Certain prophecies of judgment and the dissolution of the universe in judgment and the creation of a brand new universe, a brand new cosmos, some of those prophecies seem to find their fulfillment solely in the eschatological consummation.

But be aware of the variety of types of fulfillment that one finds in Old Testament text. Finally, the last thing principle to say about prophetic literature and interpreting prophetic text is to recognize that the primary function and the purpose of prophetic text is encouragement and warning or encouragement and exhortation to holy living. The primary purpose of Old Testament prophetic text is not prediction of the future as we said they are not simply looking into the crystal ball to see what the future has in store.

But instead prophetic texts are primarily there to encourage God's people who are having a rough go or to warn those who are tempted to stray and to encourage and to warn God's people to pursue holy living. And any interpretation of prophetic literature that does not start there is off on the wrong foot to begin with. But instead we should read prophetic literature primarily as God's continuing encouragement and exhortation for his people to obey him no matter what the cost.

So we've looked at just a handful of Old Testament literary types and there's much more that could be said. We didn't talk about narrative because we talked briefly about some of the narrative techniques and story techniques under narrative criticism. There's much more that could be said.

We touched very briefly on poetry and poetic type of literature. We looked at legal or law, Israel's law, the legal literature and also prophetic literature which makes up the bulk of the literary forms or genres in the Old Testament. But I want to move on now and consider also the New Testament and the different literary genres that make up the New Testament documents again realizing that when we read the Bible we are not simply reading a monolithic document that is simply homogenous from beginning to end but we're reading a document that although clearly demonstrating a unity within that there is a diversity of literary forms and literary types.

And it'd be sometimes I wonder just as kind of an aside how interesting it would be to ask the question if God were to reveal himself to his people today what literary media or what literary forms that would take. But in the Old New Testament God revealed himself through very common and standard literary forms and means of communication during that time. And in the New Testament what I want to do is focus on three literary genres that broadly make up the Old Testament or I'm sorry the New Testament and the three genres are narrative.

Within that would be included the Gospels and Acts though that's not necessarily to say that they are identical in their literary forms. Some would distinguish the Gospels from Acts and I'm not going to spend a lot of time discussing Acts but we'll talk a little bit about narrative in general and some additional factors in reading and interpreting New Testament narrative particularly the Gospels in light of the kind of literature it is. And then the second literary form one finds or literary genre that one finds in the New Testament would be letter or epistle which next to the Gospels and the narrative literature the Gospels and Acts makes up the bulk of the rest of the New Testament much of it in the form of Paul's epistles or Paul's letters.

And then finally the Book of Revelation the Apocalypse which is a sort of unique literary form in and of itself in that it actually is a combination of two or three literary types and that causes or raises a number of questions as to what difference does that make in the way we read it. But before moving on to the other thing to say is similar to the Old Testament is even when we might have analogies to some of these literary forms such as narrative or epistolary literature letters at the same time we can't be certain that we should read them in the identical way that we would read our letters or narratives or stories in the first century. So there are enough similarities that make it possible to understand what's going on but we also need to come to grips with some of the differences between an ancient narrative and a

modern biography or an ancient epistle and what it did and how it was put together in comparison to a modern letter.

So starting with the Gospels once again I only want to make some brief comments on additional comments on interpreting the Gospels. We talked a little bit about narrative approaches under narrative criticism and literary criticism such as looking at characterization and plot and structure etc. and uncovering the historical background and the historical and cultural references in the text.

So I won't repeat that material but I want to move beyond that and just look at some additional features in understanding New Testament narrative particularly the Gospels. And one of the things with the Gospels is frequently the identification of the literary genre of the Gospels has been wrapped up with issues relating to the historicity. That is sometimes the Gospels have been often been categorized as a certain type of literary genre that was fictional and at times that then has implications and ramifications for the historicity of the Gospel where the Gospel writers interested mainly in just theology.

We've already talked a little bit about the theology history disjunction. Does categorizing the Gospels as a certain literary form especially fictional ones mean then that the Gospel writers are not writing reliable history or interested in writing history at all? So sometimes identification of the Gospel genre is tied up with issues of historicity of the Gospels. Let me just make then just a handful of comments related to the Gospels and New Testament narrative literature.

First of all it seems to me that one of the first of all that the most common I think the most common identification of the Gospels is with first century Greco-Roman biography. And there have been several scholars I think that have been more prone to identify as some form of first century Greco-Roman biography following its

conventions and communicating through the means that first century Greco-Roman biography would have communicated. But at the same time it's also clear that the author is attempting to get across his theological perspective on the person of Jesus Christ and on the life of Christ.

So that perhaps a better classification would be that the Gospels are theological biography. And one of the implications of identifying I think the Gospels or even Acts as theological biography is obviously one needs to ask what is the theological intent not just what does it say historically about the life of Christ although that is significant. But also to realize the authors are not simply writing some simply a historical chronicle of what Jesus everything Jesus did and said.

But they have a theological motive. They are trying to communicate a theological message and one needs to try to uncover that through things like redaction criticism. We talked about how the authors arrange their material and edit especially in comparison with other the other gospel writers.

What does that reveal about Matthew Mark or Luke or John's theological intention in the way they portray Christ. While still obviously while still recognizing the rootedness of this in history that to some extent harmonization of the Gospels is a worthy goal because it attempts to establish what what happened what were the historical events in which the events in the life of Christ were the accounts of the gospel writers were rooted. So one must under uncover the theological intent of the Gospels and also I think still be able to reconstruct historically what was taking place.

But beyond that is also to think paragraphs we'll see a little bit later on as well that outside of speeches the Gospels to me don't seem as much to be built on so much a tightly knit argument from sentence to sentence or or or a clause to clause. But more

depends on the different functions of the stories and the paragraphs. So I think especially with the Gospels is to think more at the level of paragraphs.

How did the paragraphs the different stories relate to each other. But with speeches at times it's probably a little more important to follow the logic and the argumentation in the speech. As I've already said I think as well that in comparison with the other Gospels one needs to read each Gospel to ask what is their distinct and unique contribution for regarding the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

So as I just said in the previous point although these are biographies they are composed in a way to get across the unique theological perspective of the author. So we need to read the text and the Gospels in comparison with the others to see and to perceive what the unique contribution is of that writer to the life of Christ. What is their unique perspective.

I find it intriguing that the in the New Testament canon we are left with four Gospels. Why didn't the church have one official Gospel and life of Christ. There's actually an individual that tried to do that in a document called the Diatessaron.

An individual named Tatian in the early centuries of the church the first few centuries of the church tried to combine the Gospels together starting with John which interestingly today most especially non-Christian scholars think is the most historically unreliable. But he started with John and tried to compose one life of Christ or one Gospel. It's interesting that never caught on and the church allowed four distinct Gospels to stand.

So I think we need to honor that and ask what are the four distinct contributions of the Gospels. Even before we try to harmonize them and put them into one Gospel and again harmonization is important to understand the integrity of the Gospels

understand the historical events that lay behind them. But before that we need to allow the different Gospels allow their voice to speak within the canon the diversity of approaches to the life of Christ.

Two further I think implications of the genre of the Gospels I think more directly related to interpretation is first of all when we read the accounts of the life and the sayings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels we need to recognize that they are selective. That is the Gospel writers are not giving us an exhaustive complete life of Christ or an exhaustive account of everything Jesus did and said. In fact if you go to the very end of the Gospel of John in chapter 20 he actually says just the opposite.

That in fact he almost expresses frustration that no document could hope ever hope to capture everything Jesus said and did. But out of all the pool of information regarding the life and teaching of Christ that the writers had at their disposal they selected those that would communicate theologically what they were trying to say about Christ and about the life and teachings of Jesus. And the four different Gospels then provide a complementary perspectives on the life of Christ.

Related to that not only are selective but often the Gospel writers are not arranging the Gospels chronologically. Yes there is a rough chronology from the birth of Christ through his early life and ministry leading up to his death and resurrection. So there is a rough chronology and other times the Gospel writers are clear that they are arranging other material chronologically.

But there seem to be other times when the Gospel writers are more interested in arranging material thematically or logically rather than chronologically. We saw that with Matthew chapter 8 and 9 that seems to be a collection of miracle stories that Jesus performed that may not have taken place in that order or all at the same time.

And again there is no difficulty in that if Matthew himself does not claim to be saying this is the order in which they occur or which they actually occurred.

And this is the exact time in the life of Christ when all of these events took place. Instead Matthew may have more of a thematic interest just gathering stories that testify to God's mighty acts through Jesus Christ in these different miracles. Or for example in Mark chapters 2 and 3 or sections of the larger part of Mark 2 and 3 we find a series of controversy stories between Jesus and the Jewish leaders that again suggest perhaps Mark chapters 2 and 3 is not arranged chronologically as far as these all happened right after each other.

But again perhaps Mark is arranging things more thematically according to the different forms. He's taken a number of controversy stories and kind of lumped them all together in one place. So again the Gospel writers at times may be writing more arranging material thematically as opposed to strict chronology all the time.

At times they're very selective in what they include. And again you can see this by comparing Matthew Mark and Luke that obviously each of those Gospel writers especially Matthew and Mark or Matthew and Luke have material that you don't find in Mark. And both Matthew and Luke have unique material that you don't find in each other because again they're being selective.

They're not giving you an exhaustive account of everything Jesus said and did but being selective to communicate their theological point. And that was appropriate in first century Greco-Roman biography. That's how you wrote.

A final principle related to interpreting the Gospels that we've also alluded to is to recognize especially when it comes to the speeches of Jesus or even the speeches of the characters in the book of Acts is to recognize that sometimes what we find and

I'd say often what we find is a summary of an accurate and adequate summary of what the person said rather than a word for word report of everything that the author actually said. There probably are times when the authors capture at least in Greek translation the wording of what Jesus said but other times it was entirely appropriate and standard practice in first century biographies to not record the exact precise wording of what an author said but to capture in essence or summary what it was Jesus said. And as long as that summary was accurately and adequately captured the meaning and intention of what the author was trying to get across it was entirely acceptable and entirely appropriate.

In our modern day world where we are more interested in quotations, where we are interested in verbatim accounts, where we will end begin and end someone's speech or even something that we have pulled out of another document and to bracket it with quotation marks to show that we have not changed any of the wording, actually quotation marks would not have been a feature of first century recording of speech. In fact, again, the quotation marks you find in your English translations would not have been in the original Greek text but are simply there to show you that the gospel writers are recording or reporting the speech of someone else. But again, to recognize that they do not do so by giving you a word for word, blow by blow account of everything.

If that were the case, I would suspect that the New Testament documents, especially the gospels, would be 50, 60, 70 times longer than they are or even longer. We already referred to, for example, the Sermon on the Mount. If you sit down and read through the Sermon on the Mount in a good English translation, I would guess it would take you 10, 15 minutes maybe to get through and we said it's doubtful Jesus spoke only for 10 or 15 minutes but probably his sermon went on for some time.

But as long as the Sermon on the Mount is an accurate and adequate representation and summary of what it was Jesus said, then there's no difficulty whatsoever. That would have been entirely acceptable and recognized as accurate and valid in the first century. So when we read the gospels, particularly narrative, we need to keep in mind the kind of literature it is and the kind of literature is what it says about its historicity, what it says about the way of communicating theologically and what it's in studying it to understand the theological intent of the authors and understand how they report events in the life of Christ and how they report speech.

The next literary type in the New Testament that we'll discuss briefly is epistolary literature or the letters of the New Testament. This is next along with narrative though, narrative not as much. I wonder sometimes in our age, our technological age, of being able to receive text messages so quickly in very short cryptic form and even email etc etc that we're seeing even more and more our inability to sit down and listen to a story and digest a lengthy story.

But outside of the narrative, probably the literary form in the New Testament that we are most familiar with or have closest analogies to would be letters or epistles. Letters and epistles were a very common means of communicating in the first century. Virtually any information, any type of information, virtually anything could be communicated through the form of an epistle or a letter and I don't intend to distinguish those two.

Although in the past letters and epistles have frequently been distinguished, I will not distinguish those two. But virtually anything could be communicated by an epistle. It was a very handy means of communication.

Furthermore, an epistle often functioned for the substitute of the presence of the author. That is, when the author was separated by a distance from his readers, an

epistle was a way to bridge that gap. It was the next best thing to the person actually being there.

It was meant to overcome the distance between the author and his readers. So writing with an epistle was a very common way of communication. Some have seen in the epistles a more straightforward means of communication, a more didactic way of communicating as opposed to poetic and metaphorical type of communication.

Yet, at the same time, it's important to understand that even in the epistles we often find figurative use of language. We find poetic type of speech or the utilization of poems. Sometimes you'll find metaphorical type of language.

So we shouldn't read the entire book as simply lacking artistry or seeing it as simply a straightforward, literal mode of communication. Although, again, more so than poetry and other types of literature, it does communicate in a more straightforward, prosaic manner. However, we still need to be alert to artistry and, at times, poetic or even metaphorical use of language throughout the epistles as well.

One of the most important features of epistles that virtually everyone recognizes and usually points to in discussing epistles is what is known as their occasional nature. That is, the epistles are written in response to very specific situations and very specific occasions. That is, they are written to problems, specific problems.

For our purposes, problems in the first century as the church begins to spread out and is established and confronts the world and other teachings. The New Testament letters are occasional in that they are written as specific responses to those problems. That is, the letters are not just abstract theology couched in letter format.

Paul or Peter or whoever did not just sit down and kind of write a theological compendium of what they thought and then attached an introduction and the

conclusion in the form of a letter. Instead, the letters could be seen as more pastoral or practical theology. That is, theology addressed to specific circumstances and situations.

That is, the New Testament authors do not record everything they think about every theological topic, but they simply, in light of their theology, they respond theologically. Their theology is worked out in the text or presented in the text in response to specific issues and to specific problems. So yes, the epistles are very highly theological, but again, we should not expect to find anything like a systematic theology, but instead we should find more of a pastoral theology.

Theology in response to very specific issues in the church. What that means then is that we have to try to reconstruct the situation that engendered the writing of the letters, so that if you are dealing with one of Paul's letters, such as the book of Galatians, you need to have some idea of the circumstances that precipitated the writing of the letter. You need to understand, to some degree, the occasion that brought the letter about.

So this kind of takes us back to historical criticism. That is, understanding the historical circumstances that lies behind the documents. The historical circumstances that gave rise to them.

And that is certainly true in letters because they are occasional. That is, Paul just didn't sit down and decide to write a letter. He did, but he sat down and decided to write a letter because there was a specific problem that he's been made aware of that has caused him to write.

So for example, if you pick up a document such as 1 Corinthians, you need to come to grips with a series of issues or a series of problems. What were the problems in

the first century city of Corinth that the church was facing that caused Paul to include all the different information that he did? When you read through 1 Corinthians, it seems that Paul is addressing a series of topics. In fact, the book clearly tells us that there have been a series of issues after Paul left the church, established the church in Corinth.

And after he left, a number of problems arose that, number one, were made known to Paul by word of mouth. Someone orally reported to him certain problems. But number two, it appears the Corinthians themselves sent Paul a letter, isolating a series of problems.

And so Paul's letter to Corinthians that we call 1 Corinthians actually takes up those issues that he has been made aware of by word of mouth and by a letter from Corinth, and he deals with them. The difficulty is trying to reconstruct what precisely were the problems and what caused them to help us more fully understand Paul's response to those problems. So it's incumbent on us to reconstruct to some degree the situation that engendered the writing of Paul's letters, the overall situation or the situation behind the specific problems that Paul might deal with.

Scholars often call this mirror reading the letters. That is, the letters are seen as, in a sense, a mirror that reflects the situation that gave rise to it. In other words, all that we have, the only access we have to the situation is the response itself.

And so we try to find mirrored in that or reflected off that. We try to read off the letter itself what the circumstances might have been that were behind the writing of the letter. And obviously there are certainly difficulties with that type of approach, but in a sense it's necessary because again the only access we really have to the problem of the Galatian community is the book of Galatians itself.

So mirror reading is an attempt to sort of based on reading the letter itself and clues from the letter is to try to reconstruct what most likely was the situation behind Paul's letters or other New Testament, First Peter, First John, or whatever. There have been actually two analogies that might be helpful for understanding the New Testament letters, and they're perhaps not perfect, but two analogies that I have frequently found utilized in hermeneutical textbooks or discussions of Paul's letters, and I sometimes will use them in my classes. One of them is reading the New Testament letters can be compared to reading someone else's mail, or more accurately today, reading someone else's email.

So if I have access to someone else's computer and I see one of their emails on the screen, I might read that and without understanding previous dialogue or previous emails, without understanding who the person is that they're emailing, and what the situation that gave rise to the exchange through email, and what the problems were that are being addressed, I might have a difficult time reading that email. The same is true with Paul's letters. We're reading documents that were addressed to someone else, and so we need to try to recover as much as possible, and as clearly as possible, and as fully as possible, the background that gave rise to that.

Who are the readers? What was the crisis? What was the problem that caused Paul to sit down and write this letter, and how was that letter response to those problems? Another analogy that I often find used is listening to one end of a phone conversation. It's like listening to someone else talking, and all you have access to is the person you're hearing. You don't know what's going on in the other end of the line.

You don't know who they're talking to. You don't know the problem or previous exchanges that they've had. You don't know the problem that caused one of them to

call the other, the issue that caused the phone conversation to happen in the first place.

And, but interestingly, sometimes by listening to someone talk, you can kind of figure out who might be on the other end, and what they might be talking about, and what issue, and what problem, and even what the other person might be saying in response. So, those two analogies might be helpful in understanding the occasional nature, what scholars call the occasional nature of letters or epistles. That is, they were addressed to very specific occasions, or very specific circumstances.

So, one of the primary goals, or primary features of the interpretive process when it comes to letters, is the ability to reconstruct to some degree what most likely was the circumstance, the occasion, the issues, or problems that gave rise to this letter. And we've already given a couple of examples under historical reconstruction, or historical criticism. As far as, again, we looked at the letter of Colossians, for example, reconfiguring out, first of all, whether Colossians was actually addressing a specific false teaching, for example.

And then, if it was, what was the nature of that false teaching? And I gave a summary of what I thought it might be, but certainly how you understand and read Colossians will, in some respects, be affected by how you answer those questions. So, New Testament documents then are not merely, not merely the author's theological reflection on various theological topics, or the compendium of the author's theological belief, but they are rather practical or pastoral theology, theological responses to the various problems and difficulties in the first century church. One other thing to mention about letter writing that we will return to, and talk about briefly in the relationship to authorship, is to recognize that a frequent way of writing letters in the first century that was, was ubiquitous, or would have been just highly available to virtually everyone, was the use of amanuenses, or sort of secretaries.

This is kind of revealing the very human element of the production of scriptures, but most, most first century writers would have availed themselves of the services of an amanuensis. That is, very seldom did a person sit down and write a letter all by themselves, but they often would dictate it to some degree to an amanuensis, or like a scribe, and that scribe then would write what they were told to say. You, you actually see this reflected clearly in the very end of the book of Romans.

Romans chapter, when you're reading Romans, it does sound like any of Paul's other letters that he writes, but when you get to verse 22 of Romans 16, the very end, where you have this series of greetings like you find in any other letter of Paul, and that was again, rather typical of a first century letter. In verse 22 of Romans 16, you find, I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord. So Tertius was probably Paul's amanuensis, or his scribe, that he would have dictated the letter of the Romans to.

And now Tertius himself, in verse 22, kind of adds his own comment to the letter in, in greeting the readers. To move on, another facet of first century letters that you need, need to be aware of is the epistolary structure. That is, how were first century letters put together? One thing to realize before we look at that is that one of the differences, at least as far as I can tell, between Paul's letters particularly, and even Paul, even Peter's letters, for example, and, and first century letters would have been the length.

Most first century letters that we have available, copies of, or, you know, letters on papyri, for example, were much shorter in length. In Paul's letters particularly, one of the differences, they seem to be much longer than typical first century letters. Philemon might be closer to the length of many first century letters.

However, a typical, a typical epistolary structure might include most of the following five elements. Number one is an introduction or salutation, where an author would begin a letter by identifying himself and his readers with a greeting. So X to Y, X being the author, the writer of the letter, to Y the recipients, and then an expression of greetings, which often New Testament authors expand not just to greetings, but grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ, or something like that.

So often they'll expand on the introduction and salutation. Usually the introduction was followed by a thanksgiving clause, or thanksgiving period, or section, where an author sometimes thanked Greco-Roman gods, for example, for the health of the recipient, or something like that. And obviously the New Testament authors, especially Paul, you find him thanking the God of the Bible for certain things in relationship to the reader.

So an introduction or salutation, followed by a thanksgiving. Usually then followed by the body of the letter, which is the main reason for writing, communicates the main content. At least for Paul's letters, you often find this followed by what is often known a paranasis, or the exhortation section, that is based on the major information in the body.

These are the commands and exhortations towards for holy living, based on what God has done for his people through Jesus Christ. And then you usually find this followed by a closing farewell, and sometimes including a greeting of certain individuals, as we saw with Romans chapter 16. For example, if you look at the book of Ephesians, as one example, you'll find it following this format rather closely.

For example, chapters 1, 1, and 2, and verses 1 and 2 of Ephesians, are the introduction and salutation, where Paul, in typical formats, as Paul, again, usually expanding these elements, Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the church, or to the

saints who are faithful in Ephesus, grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ, something like that. Chapters 1 and 3 through 23, would correspond to the thanksgiving. Although Paul does a little bit, something a little bit different in Ephesians, where he includes something, a blessing, at the very beginning that corresponds to a Jewish barakah, or blessing.

Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, because he's done all these things. But then that does merge into Paul's thanksgiving, where he does thank God for certain aspects of the life of his readers. Followed by, perhaps in chapter 2 and verse 1, at times what is tricky is, sometimes it's difficult in some of Paul's letters to isolate exactly where the body begins.

Colossians, I think, is a good example where it's not clear when Paul has merged from the thanksgiving into the body. Sometimes I think he just does it, and doesn't necessarily have, you know, a clear transition. But perhaps chapter 2 and verse 1, through chapter 3 and verse 21 of Ephesians, could be the main body, the main reason for writing, where he reminds his readers of all that they have, and all that they are, by virtue of their identification with Jesus Christ.

Followed by the paranasis, or the exhortation section, the commands and imperatives that are found in chapter 4 verse 1, into chapter 6 and verse 20. 6:20 ends that spiritual warfare section, which is just sort of the conclusion to the entire exhortation section in the letter. And then finally, verses 21 through 24 of Ephesians 6 would be the closing farewell, which would follow a fairly standard way of bringing to a conclusion a first century letter.

So when, if you read most of Paul's letters, including the letters of Peter, and also James as well, sometimes they appear to be missing certain, what we might think, certain features of a typical Greco-Roman letter. James' letter doesn't have a specific

thanksgiving, nor does it develop like Paul's letters, where it has a kind of a theological part, followed by an exhortational part. But most of the letters you can read as models of typical first century Greco-Roman letters.

A couple of things to mention, as far as the impact this might have on interpretation, is certainly it's helpful to note where, if you're interpreting a verse, where it falls, and in what section it falls in the letter. But number one, it seems to me, what is most significant is when one of these elements is expanded. We shouldn't be too surprised that Paul begins a letter by Paul to the church at wherever, greetings or grace and peace.

That shouldn't shock us very much, that's probably not that significant. But when he expands upon that, when we find him developing and expanding upon typical epistolary formula, that might be significant in something that you want to sit up and take notice of. So be aware of where Paul or one of the other authors takes a typical element of a first century letter and expands upon it.

That might tell us something significant about what the author is emphasizing. Another thing might be, especially with Paul's letters, when a certain feature of a first century letter is missing. So for example, when one reads the letter to the Galatians, the first thing you recognize in reading that letter, especially if you've read Paul's other letters, is that it is missing a thanksgiving.

So that is right after the salutation, the introduction and salutation, which intriguingly Paul expands. Notice it begins in chapter one in verse one, Paul and apostle to show you how both of these elements expansion, but also missing elements, how that might work. Chapter one of Galatians in one through five, notice how the typical features of a first century letter get expanded.

Paul, an apostle sent not from men nor by men, but by Jesus Christ and God, the father who raised him from the dead and all the brothers with me to the churches of Galatia. Now notice how Paul's identification as an apostle, which is typical in his letters gets expanded. He describes that as not from human beings or by human beings, but by Jesus Christ and God, the father.

So that Paul seems to want to emphasize this. In fact, when you read the rest of the letter, this seems to be one of the issues that he must deal with. This seems to be one of the things that his opponents are calling into question his apostolic authority.

And now at the very outset of the letter, he signals a key feature, a key theme that he will deal with that his apostleship is not one through human, uh, that comes about by human beings, but one that comes about by divine authority. And then to the churches of Galatia, that would not be surprising, but notice the last one, grace and peace to you, a typical Pauline greeting, but notice how it gets expanded from God, our father and Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of God and father to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

And notice that long expansion, which again, I think is another key feature of the letter. Uh, Paul wants to demonstrate, uh, or at this point, Paul is assuming that his readers will understand them by into the fact that they have been redeemed and rescued through the death of Christ from the present evil age. In the rest of the letter of Galatians, Paul is going to place the old Testament law within the category of the present evil age.

Not that it's bad or evil, but it's just that the giving of the law took place before Jesus Christ in the age of the fulfillment and the Holy Spirit arrived. So if the readers have been rescued from the present evil age, why do they want to go back to it by

submitting to the Mosaic law that these Judaizers are trying to get them to submit to? So right at the beginning, Paul is kind of getting the readers on his side and anticipating and arguing for key features that his apostolic authority comes not from human beings, but by God himself and through Jesus Christ and that through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, a new era has been inaugurated. His readers have been rescued from the present evil age and have been therefore transferred into a new age.

So why would they want to go back to the old age, which is characterized by, uh, one of the characteristic features is submission to and domination by the Mosaic law. And so already Paul is, in a sense, getting the upper hand of his argument and anticipating the important features of his letter by how he is expanding the typical greeting, uh, or I'm sorry, the typical salutation of a first century letter. So I, by paying attention to how, how the, uh, certain features are expanded can be important.

The last one is, as we just said, the second one is paying attention to what is deleted. Notice that in verse between five and six, what is missing is the typical Thanksgiving. Verse six simply begins, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Jesus Christ.

It doesn't take a lot of reflection to see perhaps why Paul skipped the Thanksgiving. Most likely he is so upset with the situation. It's so urgent and perhaps he's even so upset and astonished by what the readers are doing that he doesn't have a lot to be thankful.

Not that he didn't have anything to be thankful for, but for, for in a sense, perhaps shot value, he just skips the Thanksgiving where a reader might've expected one and jumps right into the heart of the problem. So again, by paying attention to how

certain features of a letter are expanded and developed, or when they're, even they're missing, those are the times where you want to sit up and pay attention. In our next session, we'll talk a little bit more about epistolary literature in the first century and how that might influence the way we read epistles and interpret the epistles and letters, and then move on to the last literary type or genre in the New Testament, which is the Apocalypse or the Book of Revelation.