Paul’s Letter Writing, Bibliography

**Paul’s Letters**

Of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament twenty-one have traditionally been regarded as letters. Thus almost three quarters of the New Testament belongs to the letter genre. This is all the more surprising when we realize that no single writing in the Old Testament belongs to this genre. [In certain OT books letters do appear in micro-forms: 2 Sm 11:15; 1 Kg 21:9f; 2 Kg 5:6; 10:2f; Ezr 4:9-16, 17-22; etc. This is also the case in the NT: Ac 15:23-29; 23:25-30; Rv 2-3. But in all these instances the letter is merely part of a particular writing, in contrast to the large number of NT documents that are wholly letters.] Among these letters we have the very earliest written documents of the young Church. In this correspondence we see many glimpses of the Church’s life in the first century: the problems of those first Christians, their failures and victories, but also and especially the spiritual counsel and the theological thinking of those who guided the new communities in this early phase. But more important for us, as a part of Holy Scripture, the message moves out from the concrete realities of their own times to become a rich message for believers of every age.

Paul took the standard form of ancient letters and modified them as it suited him. One obvious difference is the length—Paul’s letters were generally much longer than the average letter of his day. (No comments here about long winded preachers!) Papyrus sheets were normally about 9 1/2 x 11 inches in size and could hold 150-200 words. So Paul’s shortest letter (to Philemon) would have been two sheets, and the longest, the letter to the Romans would have been somewhere between 36 and 48 sheets long. Originally it was thought that in Paul’s day these sheets were attached end to end into a papyrus scroll. But it is now considered by scholars that a codex or book form with 4 x 6 inch sheets may have been also used at the time.

Someone who wanted to send a letter would often used a scribe called an amanuensis, especially if he himself were illiterate. It is clear that Paul followed this custom as well (cf. Rom. 16:22). Dictation was slow so a variety of methods may have been employed. A scribe might receive verbatim key ideas from the sender and retire to compose the letter, or he might use a form of short hand for speedwriting before writing the final edition. Whatever level of freedom that Paul granted to his amanuensis, we can be sure from the serious tone of his letters that he took personal responsibility that what was sent in his name was what he intended often adding a closing note himself (see for example, Gal. 6:11).

The standard form of Hellenistic letters were as follows:
Prescript (including the sender, recipient, and greeting)

Thanksgiving (which often gives hints to the theme(s) to be taken up in the letter)

Main Body/Argument

Travel Plans (for example, Romans 15:14-33)

Subscript (including a closing greeting, doxology, and benediction)

Not all of these appeared, of course, in every letter (for example, Galatians does not have a Thanksgiving). In form the Pauline letters cohere closely with the Greek letter of that period. But Paul is not restricted by the form and shows his own style as he transforms, adapts, and supplements the various categories. In addition to just mentioning his name and those with him as the sender(s), Paul often invokes his apostolic authority in his opening remarks. In this he establishes himself as an authorized emissary of Christ whose message is worth heeding. The recipient may be an individual or an entire church. In the case of the latter, Paul expected his letters to be read publicly to the entire fellowship. The words “grace” and “peace” are typically found in his greetings.

In a number of Paul’s letters the main argument can be divided into two main parts—the first being primarily doctrinal in nature, the second more ethical, where application and instruction are emphasized (for example, Romans 1-11 and 12-16). The shorter and more personal letters are more difficult to outline. In his closings Paul often sends greetings from those believers who are with him, and he often greets specific individuals by name.

We will be looking closely at the dating of each book as we study them, but J. B. Lightfoot has offered a general organization of Paul’s letters by date and theme that many find helpful and easy to remember.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Paul’s Letters</th>
<th>Classification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.D. 50-52</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2 Thessalonians</td>
<td>Eschatological</td>
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| 55-57  | Capital Letters
        1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans | Soteriological    |
| 60-62  | Prison Epistles
        Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians | Christological   |
| 65-67  | Pastoral Epistles
        1 Timothy, Titus, 2 Timothy        | Ecclesiological   |
(Note the main difference between Lightfoot and Blomberg is that Blomberg, like many, take Galatians to be the first letter written based on his interpretation of Galatians 2 and Acts 11/15.)

Bibliography

In terms of bibliography, we will be discussing commentaries on Paul’s letters book-by-book as we take study them. But there are a number of books on Paul’s life and teaching that I could recommend. If you enjoy reading the assigned book by Michael Bird and would like a longer, more detailed description of the life of Paul the following two books are excellent:


An older book still worth consulting, which has been reprinted a number of times is William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897; revised and updated by Mark Wilson, Kregel, 2001). Ramsay has also written an often-cited book entitled *The Cities of St. Paul*. If you are looking for a non-technical, easy-to-read life of Paul, you might try the excellent biographer, John Pollock’s book *The Apostle: A Life of Paul*.