

Introduction to the Letters

The New Testament contains twenty-one books that bear the name “letter.” In addition to these books, we find letters inserted into other documents of the New Testament, for example, the Acts of the Apostles and the Revelation to John. In other words, letters make up a substantial part of the New Testament. They were a commonly accepted form of communication in the ancient world, just as they are today. They also have a structure that is similar to today’s letters. Therefore ancient letters can be easier for modern readers to read and interpret than almost any other ancient literary genre. By contrast the Book of Revelation is extremely difficult for modern readers to interpret correctly because the genre is not easily recognizable today.

The New Testament Letter Genre

The form or structure of New Testament letters or epistles is pretty predictable for the most part. First, they have an opening section that identifies the sender and the addressee, in that order, together with a greeting. Immediately following the opening, the letter usually includes a thanksgiving and a wish for the welfare of the addressee. Next is the body or main part of the letter, which contains the business or content of the letter. This section may also include exhortations to right behavior. The final part of the letter, the closing, usually contains greetings and good wishes for other people known to the addressee, along with a final greeting, wish, or prayer for the addressee.

How do the letters of the New Testament compare to other letters of the same time period? Many of the concerns Paul writes about in his letters are typical of private letters of his time. Because they were originally intended for a single church or an individual, we have to remember that we are, in a sense, reading someone else’s mail. Therefore because we do not always know precisely what prompted his letter, we may not be able to fully understand Paul’s correspondence. The letters addressed to churches were probably read at a time when the community was already gathered for worship, which may explain why Paul uses so much liturgical (i.e., worship-related) language in his letters.

What we have said about Paul’s letters could be said of other letters in the New Testament as well. However, some have only the appearance of a letter—perhaps an opening or closing greeting—but other parts of the book read more like a theological treatise or a homily. Although the author of these literary creations employs the form of the letter for rhetorical effect (to persuade and so on), most likely Paul never intended that they be sent as letters.

The Letter to the Hebrews is a good example. Although it has a closing greeting and blessing like we might expect in a traditional letter (see 13:20–25), it has no opening address or thanksgiving section. The author uses first person pronouns (“we,” “us”) to address his audience in the second person (“you”), like you might expect in a letter, but much of the content is like a treatise in which he argues certain theological positions, while other parts are like a homily, exhorting the readers to stay faithful and not give up their faith in Jesus Christ.

The Organization of Paul’s Letters in the New Testament

Although the New Testament includes thirteen letters that bear Paul’s name, most biblical scholars agree that only seven were actually written by Paul. The others were most likely written by later disciples of Paul, who were either appealing to his authority or honoring his memory by attributing their letters to him. The letters attributed to Paul can be divided as follows:

- The authentic letters of Paul (also called Pauline letters): These are First Thessalonians, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, Galatians, and Romans.



- The letters attributed to Paul but probably not actually written by Paul (also called Deutero-Pauline letters): These are Ephesians, Colossians, and Second Thessalonians.
- The pastoral letters, which are First Timothy, Second Timothy, and Titus. The pastoral letters are so named because they are addressed to pastors or leaders of churches.

When you begin reading the letters attributed to Paul, you may wonder why they are arranged the way they are in the New Testament. As you might expect, we have no recorded history of the development of the New Testament manuscripts. However, one thing we know for sure is that the order of the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline letters is not chronological. That is, the first one listed—the Letter to the Romans—is not the first one written. Instead the letters appear to be organized from longest to shortest, with those addressed to churches first and those addressed to individuals second. The only exception is the Letter to the Galatians, which comes before the Letter to the Ephesians, even though the Letter to the Ephesians is slightly longer.

Thus the canonical order of the letters attributed to Paul is as follows:

- The letters to churches (longest to shortest)—Romans, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, First Thessalonians, Second Thessalonians
- The letters to individuals (longest to shortest)—First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon

The Organization of the Rest of the Letters of the New Testament

In addition to the thirteen letters attributed to Paul, the New Testament contains eight additional books bearing the title “letter.” Like the letters attributed to Paul, they appear to have been arranged according to length, longest to shortest—Hebrews, James, First Peter, Second Peter, First John, Second John, Third John, and Jude. Except for the Letter to the Hebrews, which is relatively long, the other seven letters in this collection are rather short. Each of the seven is named for an Apostle or disciple of Jesus. However, today most biblical scholars think all of these letters are pseudonymous works (i.e., written by an anonymous author who was using the pseudonym of one of these famous persons). Some people today are troubled by the suggestion that the persons identified with these books did not actually write them, perhaps because it raises questions about the authority or reliability of the books. However, we should remember that ancient writers of sacred literature and their audiences were not as concerned about authorship as we are today. For them the authority of these letters rested in the fact that they were somehow tied to the traditions of these famous religious figures, not that these people actually wrote the letters.

The seven letters attributed to the Apostles and disciples of Jesus are often grouped together and identified as the “catholic epistles.” The word *catholic* means “general” or “universal.” Some have understood this designation to mean that the letters were intended for a general audience—that is, they were not written for a particular individual church but for churches in a region or even for any church in general. Others have understood it to mean that this group of letters was universally accepted among the churches. Today many biblical scholars would question whether either of these explanations is appropriate. However, because these letters have been identified as such throughout the history of the Tradition, you will see that the designation “catholic epistles” continues to be used today.

(This article is adapted from a longer one titled “Introduction to the Letters and Revelation,” by Catherine Cory, in *The Saint Mary’s Press® College Study Bible* [Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2006], pages 1676–1678.)

