

Hey Jude: An Introduction to the Epistles – Session Two



Philemon and Baucis, by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1658

***The Pauline Gospels - Part Two
(Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians,
2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon)
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Philippi

First-century Philippi was located in the northeastern corner of the Roman province of Macedonia (in present day Greece). With perhaps ten to fifteen thousand inhabitants, it was not a large city. But it was strategically located on the Via Egnatia, the main road linking Rome with the East. In addition, the important seaport of Neapolis was only ten

miles away. This “gateway between Europe and Asia” became a vital crossroads for travel and trade, both by land and by sea. Inscriptional evidence indicates that among its merchants were traders in purple dye, like Lydia, mentioned in Acts 16.

Philippi took its name from Alexander the Great’s father, Philip II of Macedon, who fortified an earlier Greek city (356 B.C.) on this site. Two centuries later, Philippi came

under Roman rule (168 – 67 B.C.). The city was the location of a famous battle in 42 B.C., in which Octavian (later emperor Augustus) defeated the assassins of Julius Caesar. The victorious generals founded Philippi as a Roman colony (Acts 16:12) and rewarded veteran soldiers with free grants of land there. Later in 31 B.C., Augustus refounded the colony under his personal patronage and boosted the population with an influx of Italian colonists.

The status of a Roman colony gave the people of Philippi many privileges. They enjoyed, for example, considerable property and legal rights and exemption from taxes. Citizens of the colony were citizens of Rome. In most ways, a Roman colony like Philippi was considered an extension of Rome itself.

When Paul arrived in Philippi, he would have found a city with a sizable Roman population, a Roman civil administration, and a largely Roman public identity and appearance. One evidence of this is that most public inscriptions were written in Latin, not Greek. While not all of the inhabitants were Roman citizens, all were expected to show loyalty to Rome and its emperor. Philippi's colonial status and identity provide a backdrop for Paul's "political" language in passages like 1:27 and 3:20. Paul urges Christians in Philippi to find their identity in a higher "citizenship" than that of Rome.

– Dean Flemming (*Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Beacon Hill Press, 2009)

The Basic Paradigm of New Testament Epistles

The New Testament epistles resemble (but are not identical with) letter writing conventions in the ancient world (and scholars often use the formulas *Greco-Roman* and *classical* for my adjective *ancient*). Letters in the ancient world followed a basic here part paradigm: introduction or salutation, body, and closing. The New Testament epistles have those parts, too, but two ingredients were added to complete the format and make the New Testament epistles distinctive. The resulting template is as follows:

- Salutation (sender, recipient, greeting)
- Thanksgiving
- Body
- Paraenesis (Section of commands)
- Closing

A few qualifications need to be made. Some epistles omit one or more of these elements. Although the order noted above is the norm, the order might be slightly rearranged, or a given element might appear more than once in a letter.

Additionally, even though the body is nearly always the dominant ingredient, with the thanksgiving and paraenesis taking up only limited space, sometimes one of those elements assumes a major role in a given letter. The constancy of the paradigm shows that the New Testament writers composed their epistles within an accepted understanding of their genre.

Anyone who wishes to see what this five-part format looks like with a specific epistle can take time to read or browse the book of Ephesians. Here is an outline that applies the grid:

- Salutation: sender, recipient, greeting (1:1 – 2)
- Thanksgiving: the spiritual riches that the recipients possess and prayer for their spiritual welfare (1:3 – 23)
- Body of the Letter (2:1 – 4:16)
- Paraenesis, or list of exhortations (4:17 – 6:20)
- Closing: Information on how the letter will be delivered and concluding benediction (6:21 – 24)

– Leland Ryken (*Letters of Grace & Beauty: A Guided Literary Study of New Testament Epistles*)

Acts of the Apostles and the Historical Paul

In the preface to his book, Paul: A Critical Life, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor describes how he changed his mind on the historical accuracy of Paul's letters compared to the Acts of the Apostles. Prior to 1950, Acts was considered the primary source with respect to chronology of events in the travels of Paul. Murphy-O'Connor cites a work by J. Knox written in 1950 that began to change the way Biblical scholars thought about the issue. Murphy-O'Connor first published works about Paul in 1964, but he identified a work by J.C. Lentz written in 1993 (43 years after Knox's work), that finally convinced him that Knox was correct in his assessment. In Murphy-O'Connor's biography of Paul, published 27 years ago, he scrupulously describes how Luke frequently misled his readers about the sequence of events related to Paul's travels. There are still some scholars who follow Acts' chronology, but they are becoming fewer in number:

I try to be as 'critical' as possible in the sense of 'exercising careful judgement', above all with respect to the use of material from the Acts of the Apostles. The tradition of lives of Paul has been to accept the framework provided by Luke, and into it to integrate material from the letters. The appropriateness of this approach, which subordinated the testimony of the

individual concerned to that of a tendentious theologian, was questioned by J. Knox, who in consequence, laid down the methodological principle, '**a fact only suggested in the letters has a status which even the most unequivocal statement of Acts, if not otherwise supported, cannot confer. We may, with proper caution, use Acts to supplement the autobiographical data of the letters, but never to correct them**' (*Chapters in a Life of Paul*, Abingdon, New York, 1950). Recent lives of Paul all pay lip-service to the principle, but in practice they not only allow Luke to exercise decisive control over the presentation of Paul's career, but fail to recognize the problems of extracting historical data from the Acts of the Apostles. The sporadic criticisms of Luke's portrayal of Paul, which are scattered through many commentaries on Acts, has been recently competently synthesized by J.C. Lentz, Jr., in his *Luke's Portrait of Paul* (1993).

I may have gone to the other extreme in the way I use the letters as the principal source of Paul's biography, but the publication of three of my colleagues have made it impossible to continue to read the Acts of the Apostles with the naivety that characterized some of my earlier work.

– Jerome Murphy-O'Connor OP (from the preface to *Paul: A Critical Life*, dated September 1, 1995)

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