Throughout the last century, there has been continuous study of Paul as a writer of letters. Although this fact was acknowledged by previous generations of scholars, it was during the twentieth century that the study of ancient letter-writing practices came to the fore and began to be applied to the study of the letters of the New Testament. Despite this continued interest in ancient epistolary practice, its importance for understanding and interpreting Paul and his writings has had varying fortunes among New Testament scholars.

The importance of the letter form for interpreting Paul first became readily apparent with the discovery and publication of the numerous Greek documentary papyri discovered in Egypt. Adolf Deissmann, soon followed by several others, was one of the first to recognize the significance of the documentary papyri for understanding the world in which the New Testament was formed, and in particular the philosophical and literary climate in which Paul’s letters were written. Deissmann is well-known for his now problematic distinction between the letter and epistle, a bifurcation predicated upon a particular social, economic, and literary view of the ancient world and the early Church as it emerged as a “writing” movement, with Paul as one of its most recognizable proponents. Nevertheless, Deissmann’s work was significant in bringing knowledge of the ancient letter form into the discussion of the meaning and significance of Paul’s letters.

After the first flush of excitement over the papyri and more sober reflection upon some of the implications of Deissmann’s analysis, epistolary study was supplanted by other issues that emerged as important in New Testament studies. Due to general dissatisfaction with the

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state of biblical epistolography, there was a revival of interest of sorts in the 1970’s as scholars began to re-evaluate the Pauline letters in light of their relationship to the letters in the ancient world. A result of this study was increased knowledge not only of the ancient letter form, but of a variety of epistolary conventions. These included the various parts of the letter, such as the thanksgiving and body, and the epistolary formulas used in them, such as the thanksgiving and disclosure formulas. In more recent times, there has been renewed attention given to the significance of the ancient Greek documentary papyri for understanding the letters of the New Testament in all of their various dimensions. These include philological, cultural, and epistolary matters, among others, to the point that commentaries on the Pauline letters are being written from this standpoint.

Similar to several of these important epochs in the study of Paul’s letters, one of the focuses of this volume is to relate Paul’s letters to the larger epistolary tradition in the Greco-Roman world. Although Greek letters provide the primary model for comparison, there are also discussions regarding the relationship of Paul’s letters to Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin, and other epistolary traditions. It is through these comparisons to the larger epistolary context that new insights and a deeper understanding of the Pauline corpus can be developed. Not only do these comparisons help solidify Paul’s location within the Greco-Roman world, they also highlight some of his educational and cultural influences that have shaped his approach.

One of the main approaches in recent scholarship to understanding the form and purpose of the Pauline letters—and one that vies for pre-eminence in analyzing his letters—is the utilization of ancient rhetorical practice and categories. In general, scholars who approach Paul’s

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2 A good example of this revived and increased interest was the development of the epistolography section of the Society of Biblical Literature. Among the members of this section were Robert W. Funk, Nils A. Dahl, Hans Dieter Betz, M. Luther Stirewalt, John L. White, and Chan-Hie Kim, all of whom made various contributions to the discussion of the form and function of the Pauline letter. Many of these scholars and their contributions are referred to in the essays throughout this volume.


4 Two of the major contributors to this discussion are George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); and Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the*