Within the Christian religion, no writer has had the influence of shaping tradition more than Paul. Consequently, it is vital to understand the historical and literary background to his letters to assure a proper reading of the text. Geographical setting, authorship, thematic introduction and epistolary theory all provide important information to the exegete on how this text is to be interpreted and, consequently, place the exegete within a framework that helps prevent imposing modern ideas, concepts and culture onto the text.

The study of epistolography and Paul is a vital undertaking if we are to understand Paul’s relationship to the Greco-Roman world of letter writing. Paul did not write in a vacuum, but was rather trained in the letter writing principles of his day. Likewise, he would have also been exposed to the different styles, forms, functions and settings in which a letter would have been written. The study of epistolography takes into account the genre of the text as a letter and provides a viable framework by which to develop an interpretation. By understanding the epistolary structure and its function within the ancient world, we can identify deviations from the norm and their potential significance for the author’s communication.

**Ancient Epistolary Theorists**

Despite the prevalence of letter writing within the ancient world, it is surprising that there are very few references to the nature of the letter opening and its construction in the surviving ancient documents. In fact, the surviving epistolary handbook by Pseudo Demetrius, Τύποι Ἐπιστολικοί, does not even discuss the formal features of the letter, but instead focuses on the different types of letters, which is actually a discussion of the letter topic. For modern scholars this absence is striking because from our perspective a handbook provides an outline of
how things are accomplished. However, just as Stowers has expressed, “what is missing from the model letters and their explanations has been more striking than what Demetrius actually says.”1 Could it be that this absence provides for us an insight into Demetrius’s expectations of his reading audience? In the study of Greek education, a number of scholars have come to the conclusion that training in letter writing occurred in the second level of schooling.2 If this is the case, than Pseudo Demetrius’s handbook would be directed at those who would already have epistolary training and would confirm that basic letter construction was part of the Greek education system.

There are two ancient writers that do mention the nature of the opening and closing parts of a letter: Julius Victor and Pseudo Libanius. In his *The Art of Rhetoric 27 (On Letter Writing)*, Julius states very briefly, “the openings and conclusions of letters should conform with the degree of friendship (you share with the recipient) or with his rank, and should be written according to customary practice.”3 Julius is advocating the traditional use of the opening and closing, but suggests that some embellishment or augmentation might be appropriate in different situations. This can be seen in some of the familiar and Christian letters to indicate friendship.4 This opinion was not held by Pseudo Libanius.

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2 Abraham J. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists* (SBLSBS 19; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 6–7; William G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (GBS; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 6–7; Jeffery T. Reed, “The Epistle,” in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period 330 B.C.–A.D. 400* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 190. On the basis of papyri, it is generally thought that students were taught the construction of a letter in the secondary stage of their education by copying other letters. This mimicking allows the students to gain an understanding of the letter form and to reproduce it later. For a great example of this, see the letter of Theon to his father (P.Oxy. I 119) in Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (trans. Lionel R.M. Strachan; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927), 201–204. Handbooks were employed extensively throughout the education system, and it is possible that Pseudo Libanius and Pseudo Demetrius could have been used in this context, albeit of the higher levels. For more information regarding the education system and letter writing see H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (New York: American Library, 1956); S.F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).
4 Francis X.J. Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter: A Study in Greek Epistolography* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1923), 62; Samuel Byrskog, “Epis-