PAUL'S LETTER THANKSGIVING

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Traditionally, the thanksgiving passages following the introductory greeting in most of the authentic Pauline letters (Rom, 1 Cor, Phil, 1 Thess, and Phlm) have been interpreted as a specific part of the letter opening (or as the letter prooemium) as well as a common convention of Hellenistic letter writing.¹ For the identification and description of both the genre and function of the Pauline thanksgivings, scholars have typically relied upon two main approaches: the demonstration of the frequent use of thanksgivings in Greek letters by other writers in the Roman Empire and the presentation of a sufficient number of such examples containing the thanksgiving clause in the same epistolary position as in Paul.

To choose an almost trivial example: The identification of an introductory greeting as a genre or formula not only depends on the frequent use of its more or less fixed wording (the most common form is “A to B χαίρειν”) but also on the place within the letter, its epistolary position, i.e. the letter opening. A final greeting has to be placed at the end of a letter, followed in very few cases by a postscriptum, and in many cases by the dating. However, as the study of the letters of well-known persons from the Greco-Roman era² and of the thousands of private letters preserved on papyrus has clearly shown, letter writers could express their intentions more clearly by using a variety of formulas or clichés whose function was determined by their epistolary position and their wording.³ The frequent use of such formulas and clichés was the condition for a reader to be able to identify and understand their intention. Formulas always have their explicit function and intention. Some of them are introductory, some disclose something, and others call someone’s attention to something or introduce a conclusion, etc. Furthermore, they also have their particular epistolary position: in the letter opening, the letter body, or the letter closing.
