It is generally recognized that Paul's letters diverge from ancient Hellenistic letter-writing practices. Although Paul wrote with Greco-Roman epistolary conventions in mind, he allowed function to dictate form with seemingly unbridled freedom. The principal function of Paul's letters was to address theological questions and pastoral needs in his congregations, and the traditional components of a letter were adapted as necessary. Subsequent letters by New Testament authors usually followed Paul's example and continued to mould each section of a letter with a view to the letter's aim. This originality is nowhere more evident than in the letter openings.

Earlier research on Paul's letters, as for New Testament letters as a whole, has attended to the literary function and form of distinct letter parts, especially on the opening thanksgiving, which seems to burst letter-writing conventions. The complexity of Paul's letter openings in particular suggest a theological intentionality that I wish to examine from a different angle. This complexity can be seen in part in a cluster of discreet allusions to a Christian worldview, which appear in virtually all of the opening sections of Paul's letters, not to mention the vast majority of subsequent New Testament letters. These allusions are formulated and arranged differently in each letter, but

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1 This disparity was observed already in H.G. Meecham, *Light from Ancient Letters: Private Correspondence in the Non-literary Correspondence of Oxyrhynchus of the First Four Centuries and Its Bearing on New Testament Language and Thought* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1923), 99. Research has focused on Greco-Roman epistolary traditions rather than Jewish traditions in part because extant Jewish letters largely follow Hellenistic conventions. See note 54.


3 This chapter develops an observation made in my *Sharers in Divine Nature: 2 Peter 1:4 in Its Hellenistic Context* (ConBNT 33; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2000), 175, 215.
recognizable motifs recur in nearly every letter. The steady reappearance of allusions to the same aspects of the Christian worldview and Christian identity suggest that Paul has an intention worth examining more closely. My proposal is that Paul’s reasons for beginning his letters by judiciously recalling this shared identity and worldview can best be understood in light of familiar Hellenistic convictions about friendship and moral exhortation, with an important clue from popular readings of Plato’s epistles.

1. IDENTIFYING THE PATTERN OF TOPICS

All of the Pauline letters whether genuine or contested open with a comparable series of references to major elements in the Christian worldview. If we take into consideration the rest of the New Testament, we find the same collection of references in six of the ten remaining letters, with only Hebrews, James, and 3 John failing to follow suit. The final exception, the Apostolic Council’s letter in Acts 15:23–29, begins without reference to the Christian worldview. Non-Pauline letters follow the same pattern as Pauline letters; in fact, no discernible difference can be detected on this point between Paul’s genuine letters and the contested letters. For that reason, this chapter treats the thirteen Pauline letters together as a letter collection with at least this common feature. As the earliest Christian letter writer, Paul is the acknowledged “creator of the apostolic letter tradition” and his influence on other writers is understandable. Culling the Pauline letter openings yields the following motifs:

1. The Christ Event. A clear allusion to Christ’s death and/or resurrection figures in most letter openings. Four letters have only possible allusions (1 Cor 1:2, 4, 9; Phil 1:5, 11; 2 Thess 1:8; Phlm 5).

4 These exceptions are not surprising. If the innovation is Paul’s, the composition of the letter in Acts 15 ostensibly predates Paul’s letters. With regard to other New Testament letters, it is doubtful whether Hebrews and James began life as letters, and the brevity of 3 John would almost preclude the elaborate allusions found in Paul’s letter openings. More surprising is that short letters such as 2 John and Jude should follow the Pauline pattern.


6 See Table 1 below for a full listing of references.

7 In the non-Pauline letters, only James and 3 John open without referring to the Christ event.