Although the disclosure formula (an epistolary convention expressing the author’s desire that the audience know something) has abundant currency in the Greco-Roman and New Testament epistolary tradition, it has received surprisingly little attention from New Testament scholars.\(^1\) The small portion of previous research that has been done has not provided an adequately nuanced definition for the formula—past definitions have been either too stringent or too broad—or criteria for its identification, and has overemphasized its transitional values. We provide a corrective to this through an analysis of the form, function, and syntax of the formula. We argue that a proper understanding of the disclosure formula has significant implications for our understanding of theme, letter structure, transitions, and prepositional modification in New Testament letters.

1. Development and Formal Expression

In his treatment of the disclosure formula in the New Testament, Terrance Mullins proposes four essential formal elements: ἀποθέω, a noetic verb in the infinitive, the person addressed, and information.\(^2\) This formulation is too narrowly construed, however, in that it cannot account for developments of the formula within the Hellenistic period.\(^3\) This is perhaps because all of Mullins’ examples come from after 100 CE, that is, within the later Roman

\(^1\) This chapter directly utilizes and expands upon Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, “τοῦτο τρώτων γνώσκοντες δὴ in 2 Peter 1:20 and Hellenistic Epistolary Convention,” *JBL* 127 (2008): 165–171. This previous article discusses 2 Pet 1:20 in more detail.


One does not necessarily gather this from reading his article, as he does not provide dates for the papyri he cites. What Mullins refers to as a disclosure formula is really a full, fixed version of a literary formula that had begun to develop much earlier in an imperatival and participial form during the Ptolemaic period. That it was an established epistolary convention before it reached its fuller expression with a verb for desire, a “verb of knowing” in the infinitive, and a pronominalized referent is clear from two factors: the consistency with which it occurs in more abbreviated forms in the body-opening and body-closing in a large number of letters from between one to three hundred years before the turn of the millennia, and the persistence of these expressions thereafter. We list some of these examples here.

**Body-Opening**

P.Hib. I 40 (261–260 BCE): ἡνα γένηται ὡς ἔπεστάλκας

P.Mich. I 10 (257 BCE): ὑπογέγραφα σοι τῆς παρὰ Σωσιπάτρου ἐλδούσης μοι ἐπιστολῆς τὸ ἀντίγραφον, ὅποι εἰδώς ...

P.Mich. I 32 (185/161 BCE): γνώριζε ἡμᾶς παραγεγενημένους ...

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4 Mullins, “Disclosure,” 47–48. Mullins includes the following examples (we have added dates): P.Oxy. 937 (3rd c. CE), P.Oxy. 1155 (104 CE), P.Oxy. 1185 (about 200 CE), P.Oxy. 1481 (early 2nd c. CE), P.Oxy. 1493 (late 3rd or early 4th c. CE), P.Oxy. 1670 (3rd c. CE), P.Oxy. 1683 (4th c. CE), P.Oxy. 1770 (late 3rd c. CE), P.Oxy. 1773 (3rd c. CE), P.Giss. 11 (118 CE), P.Giss. 13 (112–116 CE)

5 Jeffrey Reed attributes the morphological and literary differences in the formula to politeness and variation between letter types. According to Reed, the full forms are preferred in business letters and the shorter imperative forms are used in personal letters. Jeffery T. Reed, A Discourse Analysis of Philippians: Method and Rhetoric in the Debate over Literary Integrity (SNTG 3; JSNTSup 136; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 212; cf. also John L. White, “Introductory Formulae in the Body of the Pauline Letter,” JBL 90 (1971): 93. While this may be the case (there are more full formula in business letters than in private), the most important factor contributing to variation between the imperative and the full formula seems to be developmental and chronological rather than literary and contextual. Distribution of various expressions according to letter type has to be seen as a phenomenon in the Hellenistic period.