THE "EPISTOLARY INTRODUCTORY THANKSGIVING" IN THE PAPYRI AND IN PAUL

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In 1939 Paul Schubert stated: "The papyri convincingly attest a wide-spread conventional use of an epistolary, religious or non-religious, introductory thanksgiving".¹ Since then, scholars have tended merely to repeat this opinion² rather than re-examine the material presented by Schubert; they have also not searched the steadily increasing number of papyrus editions in search for new examples which might confirm the existence of the convention of an "epistolary introductory thanksgiving" of the type that is found in most of Paul's epistles.³ This long tradition of New Testament

¹ P. Schubert, Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings (BZNW 20; Berlin 1939) 180.
³ On the phraseology of the Greek letter and its formulas and clichés see especially H. Koskenniemi, Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr. (STAT B/102,2; Helsinki 1956); also helpful are K. Thraede, Grundzüge griechisch-römischer Brieftopik (Zetemata 48; München 1970); J.L. White, "Epistolary Formulas and Cliches in Greek Papyrus Letters", Society of Biblical
scholarship on epistolary form criticism reached its conclusions by examining the same sort—though not the same quantity—of material that I shall bring under review in this article.

Naturally, the form and contents of Paul’s epistles cannot be understood by concentrating exclusively on papyrus letters. Nevertheless, “Paul appears to be the Christian leader who was responsible for first introducing Christian elements into the epistolary genre and for adapting existing epistolary conventions to express the special interests of the Christian community.” These conventions are particularly evident in papyrus letters, hence the tradition of scholarship that has focused on them. Paul’s adaptation can be recognized especially in the opening and closing parts of his letters. Though it is true that Paul’s epistles have to be examined against the background of Greek, Latin and Jewish literature, too, it is still very true that his letters—as all Christian letters—"function as actual letters only to the extent that they serve conventional epistolary purposes.” This means that when Paul wanted his


White, Light, 19.

See e.g. the epistolary studies of K. Berger, “Gattungen”, 1326-1363; C.J. Bjerkelund, Parakalô. Form, Funktion und Sinn der parakalô-Sätze in den paulinischen Briefen (BTN 1; Oslo 1967); H.Y. Gamble, The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans. A Study in Textual and Literary Criticism (StD 42; Grand Rapids 1977) 84ff; I. Taatz, Frühjüdische Briefe. Die paulinischen Briefe im Rahmen der offiziellen religiösen Briefe des Frühjudentums (Novum Testamentum et orbis antiquus 16; Fribourg 1991).

6 White, Light, 20.