PETITION AS A LITERARY FORM

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The study of forms in the New Testament has proceeded in two different directions. On the one hand there has been the work of Form-Criticism, in the Gospels especially, in which the content of the "form" has played a most important part and the structure has often appeared to be subordinated. On the other hand there has been the work of Literary Criticism with its approach to form marked by a tendency to let structure characterize a "form" and to let the content contribute only functional elements. In this paper I shall analyze the petition as a form from the latter point of view.

Petitions to government officials constitute a significant proportion of the papyri recovered from the centuries immediately before and after the New Testament period. They range from the lengthy Petition of Dionysia to the Praefect (P. Oxy. 237) to the simple Petition of Alypius included in a note to his brother (P. Oxy. 1491). In all of these—and in private petitions as well—there exists a formal pattern built around three basic elements and a few stylized elaborations. The order in which these elements occurs in the petition is by no means rigid, but it follows stricter patterns than those in the thanksgiving, being close to that fixity which characterizes opening formulae of ancient Greek letters.

The three basic elements of a petition are the background, the petition verb, and the desired action. These are always present either explicitly or implicitly. They are necessary to the constitution of the petition as "form" in literature of this period. They usually occur in the order given. Two elaborations which frequently appear are the address and the courtesy phrase. When present, they tend to be attrac-
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ted to the petition verb, occurring before or after it—more often after.

In an Official Petition the background consists of the recital of such evidence as the petitioner considers the official needs to know in order to decide favorably for the petitioner. The statement of the request which comes next is conveyed by the petition verb, always in the first person (singular or plural) and always in the present tense. The address identifies the one to whom the petition is directed; it may use his name, his title, his status with respect to the petitioner, or merely a pronoun. The courtesy phrase is usually some form of εὰν σοι δόξη. Finally, the desired action relates in detail the request which the petitioner seeks of the official.

Into this structure were placed perfunctory legal requests, passionate pleas for justice, instructions to spouses, matters of business, and filial coercion. The legal request of Nicias to the epistrategus (P. Oxy. 487) is "A petition, written in very bad Greek, to the epistrategus from Nicias, who wished to be relieved of the duty of acting as guardian to two minors." It illustrates the complete structure of the petition.

background / petition / address / courtesy phrase / desired action

vss. 4-12 ... / δέομεν / κύριαί / τάν σοι τῇ τῇ δόξην / vss. 13-19 1)

Other examples show the more usual variations within the five elements of the Official Petition, from the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. 131... καὶ /παρακαλῶι(ῶι)/τῷ[ν] ἕμου ἀγαθο[ῶι]ν δεσπ[ῶi]τῃ(τῃ)/-/παρα-

κενσάσαι ... 2)

718. ... /δέομαι-/εὰν σοι δόξη / γράψαι ... 3)

262. ... δίω/δίξω-/-/ / αναγράφῃ ... 4)

Four verbs are generally used in Official Petitions: ἁξιοῦν, δείσθαι, ἐρωτάν, and παρακάλεῖν. The order is listed to indicate their increasing degree of personal concern. The usual petition verb is ἁξιοῦν, which may be termed the Routine Official way of stating a petition. It dominates the Official Petitions. To use another verb with ἁξιοῦν, however, is to break the routine pattern and heighten concern for the petitioner. The verb which is frequently used in this manner is δείσθαι—viz:

71... /ἀξιοῦ καὶ δέομαι/επίθη καὶ ἀπετέλεσο ... 5)

2) Ibid., Volume I, p. 204.
3) Ibid., Volume IV, p. 191.
5) Ibid., Volume I, p. 132.