In discussing the prophetic genre in the Old Testament, we saw that scholars frequently distinguished between two terms, forth-telling and foretelling. That’s common language you’ll find in particularly hermeneutics type or biblical interpretation type text books to describe what prophetic literature does and usually scholars will emphasize the fact that Old Testament prophecy is primarily forth-telling or whatever language you want to use to describe that. That is, the prophets are primarily concerned, not with just predicting the future or some course of events that will transpire in the future, though they do that, but in proclaiming a message to the reader’s present situation. We said that when the nation of Israel would go off into idolatry and renege on their covenant obligation with God, God would raise up a prophet to call them back to faithfulness to the covenant and to warn them of the consequences of failure to obey the covenant relationship and even to pronounce judgment on Israel and the other nations because of their sinfulness. But we did say that the prophets do engage in what scholars have called foretelling, and is promising, anticipating or predicting the future. We said that at times, one needs to distinguish between the immediate future of the readers and their horizons as opposed to the more distant future, which would be the wrap up of the cosmos and God’s plan for the conclusion of the entire world, often known as the eschaton, things related to God’s intention for the end. But I’ve also suggested we need to be aware of speculation as to how prophetic texts will be fulfilled and to be aware of the variety of ways we find prophetic texts being fulfilled.

Sometimes we find prophetic texts that in the New Testament get fulfilled rather in a straightforward manner. We’ve talked a little bit already about the
quotation from Micah chapter 5, in Matthew chapter 2, where Micah’s prophecy of a royal figure being born in Bethlehem seems to be fulfilled in a rather straightforward manner. On the other hand, we see what is sometimes called “typological” or “analogical” type of fulfillment, where the Old Testament author may not necessarily be predicting a certain event in the distant future, but instead, we find in an Old Testament text a person or an event or something that gets repeated, something that functions as a type or pattern that gets picked up and repeated in a greater way in God’s dealing with his people and life of fulfillment with Christ. So the conviction being that the same God who is at work fulfilling his promises and bringing about His purposes under the old covenant is likewise in a similar but greater way at work again to fulfill his promises under the new covenant salvation that is inaugurated in the purpose of Jesus Christ. So again, sometimes you find a very straightforward fulfillment, sometimes you find more analogical or typological type of fulfillment.

Sometimes you find New Testament texts portraying a fulfillment that seems to be more spiritual; that is, not a straightforward physical or literal way that one finds it portrayed in the Old Testament. For example, in Acts chapter 15, we find these words, where in the well-known apostolic council, that is, the Jerusalem Council, where Paul and others are debating the question what is required for Gentiles to become God’s people? Do they have to submit to the Mosaic Law or not? And in Acts we find this quotation justifying the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God. Verses 16 and also 17, which intriguingly is a quotation from Amos chapter 9 in verse 11 in the Old Testament which is an anticipation or prediction of the restoration of the Davidic monarchy. Now, notice it gets quoted here in Acts chapter 15, “After this, I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear [my] name, says the Lord, who does those things [that] have been known for ages.” So interestingly, the author seems to find fulfillment of the Amos text, anticipating the restoration of the Davidic
monarchy and rulership over the nations is already being fulfilled in the inclusion of Gentiles into the one people of God by responding in faith to Jesus Christ the Messiah. Now whether that has yet another fulfillment that is more strictly physical in the future is a possibility but the point is that the New Testament authors often find particularly references to restoration of national Israel and the Davidic monarchy with a king ruling over them they find those prophecies frequently fulfilled in the first coming of Christ and his people, the church.

Another feature of fulfillment, when you consider how Old Testament texts get picked up in the New Testament, to keep in mind is sometimes you’ll find texts that will receive a fulfillment in both the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ as well. That is, certain Old Testament texts that anticipate a future fulfillment get fulfilled, it seems to me, in two stages which correspond to Jesus’ first and second coming. That is, at the first coming of Christ Jesus inaugurates the fulfillment, but at his second coming he consummates it. This is wrapped up in the New Testament understanding of Old Testament fulfillment or New Testament understanding of eschatology that is what the Old Testament often anticipated as a final climatic event that would bring the present age to a close and inaugurate a brand new age. That event in the New Testament is frequently seen as split into two parts: one part corresponding to the first coming of Christ that inaugurates it, the second part corresponding to the consummation, the second coming of Christ which brings it to its conclusion. So sometimes you need to be aware that prophetic texts will find a fulfillment in both the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ as well.

One last thing to say about prophetic literature in terms of fulfillment is particularly when we are prone to speculate about how something will be fulfilled or whether certain events in our day and age are fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic texts and how close we are to the end and speculations such as that, is, I find it instructive to note how fulfillment took place at the first advent of Jesus Christ and how different persons responded to that, particularly how the Jewish
leaders, in fact, rejected Christ because they were not prepared for nor did they see prophecy being fulfilled in a way that they expected. So it’s almost as if at the first coming of Jesus Christ, we find prophecy being fulfilled in a very unexpected way. I wonder if, in some respects, that does not provide a model or at least a possibility, that God could fulfill things in a very unexpected way in the future, at his second coming, therefore causing us to be very cautious and avoid speculation as to how this is going to be fulfilled and exactly where and when and what that’s going to look like. In the same way that God fulfilled his promises and fulfilled Old Testament prophecies in a very unexpected way at the first coming of Christ, opens a possibility for him, as some have said, “having some tricks up his sleeve,” and still having some secrets or still fulfilling things in a way that is very unexpected, yet still in clear fulfillment and consistent with the promises and prophecies that he has made.

So, be aware of the variety of types of fulfillment when one moves from the Old to the New Testament. Obviously, I guess one could add a further type, and that is certain prophecies seem to only find fulfillment in the eschatological consummation of certain prophecies of judgment and the dissolution of the universe and in judgment and creation of a brand new universe and brand new cosmos. Some of those prophecies seem to find their fulfillment solely in the eschatological consummation, but be aware of the variety of types of fulfillment that one finds in Old Testament texts.

Finally, the last thing of principle to say about prophetic literature and interpreting prophetic texts is to recognize that the primary function and purpose of prophetic text is encouragement and warning or encouragement and exhortation to holy living. The primary purpose of Old Testament prophetic texts is not prediction of the future. As we said, they are not simply looking into the crystal ball to see what the future has in store. Instead, prophetic texts are primarily there to encourage God’s people who are having a rough go or to warn those who are tempted to stray and to encourage and to warn God’s people to pursue holy living.
Any interpretation of prophetic literature that does not start there is off on the wrong foot to begin with. We should read prophetic literature primarily as God’s continuing encouragement and exhortation for his people to obey him no matter what the cost.

New Testament Literary Genres

So we’ve looked at just a handful of Old Testament literary types and there is much more that could be said. We didn’t talk about narrative because we talked briefly about some of the narrative techniques and story techniques under narrative criticism. There is much more that could be said. We touched very briefly on poetry and poetic type of literature. We looked at (the legal or law of) Israel’s law or the legal literature and also prophetic literature, which makes up the bulk of the literary forms or genres in the Old Testament. But I want to move on now and consider also the New Testament and the different literary genres that make up the New Testament documents, again realizing that when we read the Bible we are not simply reading a monolithic document that is simply homogenous from beginning to end, but we are reading a document that, although clearly demonstrating a unity within, there is a diversity of literary forms and literary types. Sometimes I wonder, kind of as an aside, how interesting it would be to ask the question, if God were to reveal himself to his people today, what literary media or what literary forms that would take. In the Old and New Testaments God revealed himself through very common and standard literary forms and means of communication during that time.

In the New Testament what I want to do is focus on three literary genres, that broadly make up the New Testament. The three genres are: narrative - within that would be included the Gospels and Acts, though that is not necessarily to say that they are identical in their literary forms. Some would distinguish the Gospels from Acts, and I’m not going to spend a lot of time discussing Acts. But we’ll talk a little bit about narrative in general and some additional factors in reading and
interpreting New Testament narrative, particularly the Gospels in light of the kind of literature it is. The second literary form one finds or literary genre one finds in the New Testament would be Letter or Epistle, which next to the Gospels and the narrative literature, which are the Gospels and Acts, makes up the bulk of the rest of the New Testament. Much of it is in the form of Paul’s epistles or Paul’s letters. Then, finally, the book of Revelation, the apocalypse, which is sort of a unique literary form in and of itself, in that it actually is a combination of two or three literary types and that causes or raises a number of questions as to what difference does that make in the way we read it. But before moving on, the other thing to say is, similar to the Old Testament, even when we might have analogies to some of these literary forms such as narrative or epistolary literature or letters, at the same time we can’t be certain that we should read them in the identical way that we would read our letters or narratives or stories in the first century. There are enough similarities that make it possible to understand what is going on, but we also need to come to grips with some of the differences between an ancient narrative and a modern biography or an ancient epistle and what it did and how it was put together in comparison to a modern letter.

Gospels Genre

Starting with the Gospels, once again I only want to make some brief comments and additional comments on interpreting the Gospels. We talked a little bit about narrative approaches and narrative criticism and literary criticism such as looking at characterization, plot and structure, etc. and uncovering the historical background, and the historical and cultural references in the text. So I won’t repeat that material, but I want to move beyond that and just look at some additional features in understanding New Testament narrative, particularly the Gospels. One of the things with the Gospels is frequently the identification of the literary genre of the gospels has been wrapped up with issues relating to historicity. That is, sometimes the gospels have been often been categorized as a certain type of literary genre that was fictional and that then has implications and ramifications
for the historicity of the Gospels. Were the Gospel writers interested mainly in just the theology? We’ve already talked a little bit about the theology/history disjunction. Does categorizing the Gospels as a certain literary form, especially fictional ones mean then that the Gospel writers are not writing reliable history or interested in writing history at all? So sometimes the identification of the Gospel genre is tied up with issues of historicity of the Gospels.

Let me just make then just a handful of comments related to the Gospels and New Testament narrative literature. First of all, it seems to me that one of the most common, identification of the Gospels is with first century Greco-Roman biography. There have been several scholars, that have been more prone to identify some form of first century Greco-Roman biography, following its conventions and communicating through the means that first century Greco-Roman biography would have communicated, but at the same time it’s also clear that the author is attempting to get across his theological perspective on the person of Jesus Christ and on the life of Christ. So perhaps a better classification would be that the Gospels are theological biography.

One of the implications of identifying, the Gospels or even Acts as theological biography is, obviously one needs to ask what is the theological intent and not just what does it say historically about the life of Christ, although that is significant, but also to realize the authors are not simply writing a historical chronicle of everything Jesus did and said, but they have a theological motive. They are trying to communicate a theological message and one needs to try to uncover that through things like redaction criticism. We talked about how the authors arranged and edited their material especially in comparison with the other Gospel writers. What does that reveal about Matthew, Mark, or Luke, or John’s theological intention in the way they portray Christ? Obviously, we still recognize the rootedness of this in history - that to some extent, harmonization of the Gospels is a worthy goal because it attempts to establish what happened. What
were the historical events in which the events in the life of Christ - the accounts of the Gospel writers - were rooted. So one must uncover the theological intent of the Gospels, and also, I think, still be able to reconstruct historically what was taking place, but beyond that is also to think paragraphs. We'll see a little bit later on as well that outside of speeches the Gospels to me don't seem as much to be built on so much a tightly-knit argument from sentence to sentence or clause to clause. But it depends more on the different functions of the stories and the paragraphs. So I think especially with the Gospels one needs to think more at the level of paragraphs. How do the paragraphs, the different stories, relate to each other? But with speeches, at times it probably is a little more important to follow the logic and the argumentation in the speech.

As I've already said, I think as well that in comparison with the other Gospels one needs to read each Gospel and ask: what is their distinct and unique contribution regarding the life and teaching of Jesus Christ? So, as I just said in the previous point, although these are biographies, they are composed in a way to get across the unique theological perspective of the author. So we need to read the text in the Gospels in comparison with the others to see and to perceive what the unique contribution that writer makes to the life of Christ. What is their unique perspective?

I find it intriguing that in the New Testament canon we are left with four Gospels. Why didn't the church have one official Gospel and life of Christ? There's actually an individual that tried to do that in a document called the Diatessaron. An individual named Tatian in the early centuries of the church tried to combine the Gospels together starting with John - which, interestingly, today most (especially non-Christian) scholars think is the most historically unreliable - but he started with John and tried to compose one life of Christ or one Gospel. It's interesting that never caught on and the church allowed four distinct Gospels to stand. So I think we need to honor that and ask what are the four distinct
contributions of the Gospels, even before we try to harmonize them and put them into one Gospel. Again harmonization is important to understand the integrity of the Gospels - understand the historical events that lay behind them - but before that we need to allow the different Gospels, allow their voice to speak within the canon and the diversity of approaches to the life of Christ.

Gospel Genre Implications

Two further, I think, implications of the genre of the Gospels, I think more directly related to interpretation, is first of all, when we read the accounts of the life and the sayings of Jesus Christ as reported in the Gospels, we need to recognize that they are selective; that is, the Gospel writers are not giving us an exhaustive complete life of Christ or an exhaustive account of everything Jesus did and said. In fact, if you go to the very end of the Gospel of John in chapter 20, he actually says just the opposite; that in fact he almost expresses frustration that no document could hope - ever hope - to capture everything Jesus said and did. But out of all the pool of information regarding the life and teaching of Christ that the writers had at their disposal, they selected those that would communicate theologically what they were trying to say about Christ and about the life and teachings of Jesus. The four different Gospels then provide complementary perspectives on the life of Christ.

Related to that, not only are they selective, but often the Gospel writers are not arranging their Gospels chronologically. Yes, there is a rough chronology from the birth of Christ through his early life and ministry leading up to his death and resurrection; so there is a rough chronology. At other times the Gospel writers are clear that they are arranging other material chronologically. But there seem to be other times when the Gospel writers are more interested in arranging material thematically or logically rather than chronologically. We saw that with Matthew chapter 8 and 9; there seems to be a collection of miracle stories that Jesus performed that may not have taken place in that order or all at the same time.
Again, there's no difficulty in that if Matthew himself does not claim to be saying this is the order in which they actually occurred and that this is the exact time in the life of Christ when all of these events took place. Instead, Matthew may have more of a thematic interest just gathering stories that testify to God's mighty acts through Jesus Christ in these different miracles. Or, for example, in Mark chapters 2 and 3, or sections (the larger part) of Mark 2 and 3. Here we find a series of controversy stories between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, that again suggest perhaps Mark chapters 2 and 3 is not arranged chronologically as far as these all happened right after each other. But again perhaps Mark is arranging things more thematically according to the different forms; he's taken a number of controversy stories and kind of lumped them all together in one place. So again, the Gospel writers at times may be arranging material thematically as opposed to strict chronology all the time. At times they're very selective in what they include. You can see this by comparing Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that obviously each of those Gospel writers, especially Matthew and Mark - or Matthew and Luke material that you don't find in Mark. Both Matthew and Luke have unique material that you don't find in each other because again, they're being selective. They're not giving you an exhaustive account of everything Jesus said and did but are being selective to communicate their theological point. That was appropriate in first-century Greco-Roman biography; that's how you wrote.

A final principle related to interpreting the Gospels that we've also alluded to is to recognize, especially when it comes to the speeches of Jesus or even the speeches of the characters in the book of Acts, that sometimes what we find (and I'd say often what we find) is an adequate summary of what the person said rather than a word-for-word report of everything that the author actually said. There probably are times when the authors capture, at least in Greek translation, the wording of what Jesus said; but other times it was entirely appropriate and standard practice in first century biographies to not record the exact precise
wording of what an author said but to capture in essence or summary, what it was Jesus said. As long as that summary accurately and adequately captured the meaning and intention of what the author was trying to get across, it was entirely acceptable and entirely appropriate.

In our modern-day world we are more interested in quotations. We are interested in verbatim accounts where we will begin and end someone’s speech or even something that we have pulled out of another document and to bracket it with quotation marks to show that we have not changed any of the wording. Actually quotation marks would not have been a feature of first century recorded speech. In fact, again, the quotation marks you find in your English translations would not have been in the original Greek text but are simply there to show you that the Gospel writers are recording or reporting the speech of someone else. But again, to recognize that they do not do so by giving you a word-for-word, blow-by-blow account of everything. If that were the case, I would suspect that the New Testament documents, especially the Gospels, would be fifty, sixty, seventy times longer than they are, or even longer. We have already referred to, for example, the Sermon on the Mount. If you sit down and read through the Sermon on the Mount, in a good English translation, I would guess it would take you ten, fifteen minutes maybe to get through. We said it is doubtful Jesus spoke only for ten or fifteen minutes. Probably, his sermon went on for some time. But, as long as the Sermon on the Mount is an accurate and adequate representation and summary of what it was Jesus said, then there's no difficulty whatsoever. That would have been entirely acceptable and recognized as accurate and valid in the first century.

So when we read the Gospels, particularly the narrative, we need to keep in mind the kind of literature it is and what it says about its historicity, what it says about the way of communicating theologically, and studying it to understand the theological intent of the authors and understand how they report events in the life of Christ and how they report speech.
Epistolary Literary Genre

The next literary type in the New Testament that we'll discuss briefly, is epistolary literature, or the Letters of the New Testament. Along with narrative I wonder sometimes in our technological age of being able to receive text messages so quickly in very short, cryptic form, and even email, etc. that we are seeing even more and more our inability to sit down and listen to a story and digest a lengthy story. But outside of the narrative, probably the literary form in the New Testament that we are most familiar with or have closest analogies to would be Letters, or Epistles. Letters and epistles were very common means of communicating in the first century. Virtually any type of information, virtually anything could be communicated through the form of an epistle or a letter. I don't intend to distinguish those two, although in the past, letters and epistles have frequently been distinguished; I will not distinguish those two. But virtually anything could be communicated by an epistle. It was a very handy means of communication. Furthermore, an epistle often functioned as a substitute for the presence of the author. That is, when the author was separated by a distance from his readers, an epistle was a way to bridge that gap. It was the next best thing to the person actually being there. It was meant to overcome the distance between the author and his readers. So writing with an epistle was a very common way of communication.

Some have seen in the Epistles a more straightforward means of communication, a more didactic way of communicating as opposed to poetic and metaphorical type of communication. Yet at the same time, it's important to understand that even in the Epistles, we often find figurative use of language; we find poetic type of speech or the utilization of poems; sometimes you'll find metaphorical type of language. So we shouldn't read the entire book as simply lacking artistry or seeing it as simply a straightforward, literal mode of communication. Although again, more so than poetry and other types of literature,
it does communicate in a more straightforward, prosaic manner. However, we still need to be alert to artistry and, at times, poetic or even metaphorical use of language throughout the Epistles as well.

Occasional Aspects of the Epistles

One of the most important features of Epistles that virtually everyone recognizes and usually points to when discussing Epistles is what is known as their occasional nature; that is, the Epistles are written in response to very specific situations and very specific occasions, that is, they are written to problems, specific problems. For our purposes, there are problems in the first century as the Church begins to spread out, is established, and confronts the world and other teachings. The New Testament Letters are occasional in that they are written as specific responses to those problems. That is, the Letters are not just abstract theology couched in letter format. Paul or Peter or whoever did not just sit down and write a theological compendium of what they thought and then attached an introduction and conclusion in the form of a letter. Instead, the Letters could be seen as more pastoral or practical theology, that is, theology addressed to specific circumstances and situations. The New Testament authors don't record everything they think about, every theological topic, but they simply, in light of their theology, respond theologically. Their theology is worked out in the text, or presented in the text, in response to specific issues and to specific problems. So, yes, the Epistles are very highly theological, but again, we shouldn't expect to find anything like a systematic theology. Instead, we should find more of a pastoral theology - theology in response to very specific issues in the church.

What that means then is that we have to try to reconstruct the situation that engendered the writing of the Letters. If you are dealing with one of Paul's letters, such as the book of Galatians, you need to have some idea of the circumstances that precipitated the writing of the letter. You need to understand to some degree the occasion that brought the letter about. So this takes us back to historical
criticism to understand the historical circumstances that lies behind the documents, the historical circumstances that gave rise to them. That is certainly true in Letters, because they are occasional. Paul just didn't sit down and decide to write a letter. He decided to sit down and decided to write a letter because there was a specific problem that he's been made aware of, that has caused him to write.

So, for example, if you pick up a document such as 1 Corinthians, you need to come to grips with a series of issues or a series of problems. What were the problems in the first century city of Corinth that the church was facing that caused Paul to include all the different information that he did? When you read through 1 Corinthians, it seems that Paul is addressing a series of topics. In fact, the book clearly tells us that there have been a series of issues after Paul left the church, having established the church in Corinth. After he left, a number of problems arose that, number one, were made known to Paul by word of mouth. Someone orally reported to him certain problems.

Number two, it appears the Corinthians themselves sent Paul a letter, isolating a series of problems. So Paul's letter, the first to Corinthians that we call 1 Corinthians, actually takes up those issues that he has been made aware of by word of mouth and by letter from Corinth and he deals with them. The difficulty is trying to reconstruct what precisely were the problems and what caused them, to help us more fully understand Paul's response to those problems. So it's incumbent on us to reconstruct to some degree the situation that engendered the writing of Paul's letters, the overall situation or the situation behind specific problems that Paul might deal with.

Scholars often call this “mirror reading” the letters. That is, the letters are seen as in a sense a mirror that reflects the situation that gave rise to it. In other words all that we have, the only access we have to the situation is the response itself. So we try to find mirrored in that or reflected off of that, we try to read off the letter itself what the circumstances might have been that were behind the writing of the letter. Obviously there are certainly difficulties with that type of
approach, but in a sense it’s necessary, because again the only access we really have to the problem of the Galatian community is the book of Galatians itself. So mirror-reading is an attempt to, based on reading the letter itself and clues from the letter, try to reconstruct what most likely was the situation behind Paul’s letters, or other New Testament epistles--I Peter, I John or whatever.

Helpful Analogies

There have been actually two analogies that might be helpful for understanding the New Testament letters and they’re perhaps not perfect, but two analogies that I have frequently found utilized in hermeneutical textbooks or discussions of Paul’s letters and I sometimes will use them in my classes. One of them is reading the New Testament letters can be compared to reading someone else’s mail, or more accurately today, reading someone else’s email. So if I have access to someone else’s computer and I see one of their emails on the screen, I might read that, and without understanding previous dialogue or previous emails without understanding who the person is that they are emailing and what the situation that gave rise to the exchange through email and what the problems were that are being addressed. I might have a difficult time reading that email. The same is true with Paul’s letters. We’re reading documents that were addressed to someone else. So we need to try to recover as much as possible and as clearly as possible and as fully as possible the background that gave rise to that. Who were the readers, what was the crisis, what was the problem, that caused Paul to sit down and write this letter, and how is that letter a response to those problems?

Another analogy that I often find used, is listening to one end of a phone conversation. It’s like listening to someone else talking and all you have access to is the person you’re hearing. You don’t know what’s happening on the other end of the line. You don’t know who they’re talking to. You don’t know the problem or previous exchanges that they’ve had. You don’t the problem that caused one of them to call the other, the issue that caused the phone conversation to happen in
the first place. But interestingly, sometimes by listening to someone talk, you can kind of figure out who might be on the other end and what they might be talking about and what issue, what problem, and even what the other person might be saying in response.

So those two analogies might be helpful in understanding what scholars call the occasional nature - of letters or epistles; that is, they were addressed to very specific occasions or very specific circumstances.

So one of the primary goals or primary features of the interpretive process, when it comes to letters, is the ability to reconstruct to some degree what most likely was the circumstance, the occasion, the issues, the problems that gave rise to this letter. We’ve already given a couple of examples of historical reconstruction or historical criticism, as far as again we’ve looked at the letter of Colossians, for example, figuring out first of all whether Colossians was actually addressing a specific false teaching. Then if it was, what was the nature of that false teaching. I gave a summary of what I thought it might be, but certainly how you understand and read Colossians will in some respects be affected by how you answer those questions.

So New Testament documents then are not merely the author’s theological reflection on various theological topics, or a compendium of the author’s theological belief. But, they are rather practical or pastoral theology, theological responses to the various problems and difficulties in the first century church.

Amanuensis

One other thing to mention about letter writing, that we will return to, and talk about briefly in relationship to authorship is to recognize that a frequent way of writing letters in the first century that was ubiquitous or would have been just highly available to virtually everyone was the use of amanuenses or sort of secretaries. This is reveals the very human element of the production of Scripture,
but most first century writers would have availed themselves of the services of an amanuensis. Very seldom did a person sit down and write a letter all by themselves, but they often would dictate it to some degree to an amanuensis or like a scribe and that scribe then would write what they were told to write.

You actually see this reflected clearly in the very end of the book of Romans. When you’re reading Romans it does sound like any of Paul’s other letters that he writes - but when you get to verse 22 of Romans 16, the very end where you have this series of greetings like you find in any other letter of Paul and that was again rather typical of a first century letter. In verse 22 of Romans 16 you find, “I Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.” So Tertius was probably Paul’s amanuensis or his scribe that he would have dictated the letter of Romans to. Now Tertius himself in verse 22 adds his own comment to the letter in greeting the readers.

Epistolary Structure

To move on, another facet of first century letters that you need to be aware of is the Epistolary Structure, that is, how were first century letters put together. One thing to realize before we look at that is that one of the differences, at least as far as I can tell, between Paul’s letters particularly and even Peter’s letters for example and first century letters would have been the length. Most first century letters that we have available as letters on papyri, for example, were much shorter in length. In Paul’s letters particularly, one of the differences is they seem to be much longer than typical first century letters. Philemon might be closer to the length of many first century letters.

Introduction/Salutation

However, a typical epistolary structure might include most of the following five elements. Number one is an introduction or salutation, where an author will begin a letter by identifying himself and his readers with a greeting. So, X to Y, X being the author or the writer of the letter to Y the recipients. Then there could be
an expression of greetings, which often New Testament authors expand not just to greetings but “Grace and Peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ” or something like that. So often they’ll expand on the introduction and salutation.

Thanksgiving

Usually the introduction is followed by a thanksgivings clause or thanksgiving period or section, where an author sometimes thanked Greco-Roman gods, for example, for the health of the recipient or something like that. Obviously in the New Testament authors, especially Paul, you find them thanking the God of the Bible for certain things in relationship to the readers. So an introduction and/or salutation followed by a thanksgiving.

Body & Exhortation

This is usually then followed by the body of the letter, which is the main reason for writing. It communicates the main content. At least for Paul’s letters you often find this followed by what is often known as a paraenesis or the exhortation section that is based on the major information in the body. These are the commands and exhortations for holy living based on what God has done for his people through Jesus Christ.

Farewell and Greetings

And then you usually find this followed by a closing farewell, and sometimes including a greeting of certain individuals as we saw with Romans chapter 16.

For example, if you look at the book of Ephesians as one example, you’ll find it following this format rather closely. For example, chapter 1 verses 1 and 2 of Ephesians are the introduction and salutation where Paul in typical format - as Paul again usually expanding these elements: “Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ to the church, to the saints who are faithful in Ephesus, Grace and Peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ” or something like that. Chapters 1 in 3 through 23 would
correspond to the thanksgiving. Paul does something a little bit different in Ephesians, where he includes a blessing at the very beginning that corresponds to a Jewish *berakah* or blessing, “Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” because he’s done all these things. Then that merges into Paul’s thanksgiving, where he does thank God for certain aspects of the life of the readers. That is followed by perhaps in chapter 2 in verse 1 at times what is tricky is, sometimes it’s difficult in some of Paul’s letters to isolate exactly where the body begins. Colossians, I think, is a good example where it’s not clear when Paul has emerged from the thanksgiving into the body. Sometimes I think he just does it and doesn’t necessarily have a clear transition. But perhaps chapter 2 in verse 1 through chapter 3 in verse 21 of Ephesians could be the main body, main reason for writing. Here he reminds his readers of all that they have and all that they are by virtue of their identification with Jesus Christ. This is followed by the paraenesis or the exhortation section, the commands and imperatives that are found in chapter 4, verse 1 into chapter 6 in verse 20. Ephesians 6:20 ends that spiritual warfare section, which is just sort of the conclusion to the entire exhortation section of the letter. Then, finally, verses 21 through 24 of Ephesians 6 would be the closing farewell, which would follow a fairly standard way of bringing to a conclusion a first century letter.

So if you read most of Paul’s letters including the letters of Peter, and also James as well, sometimes they appear to be missing what we might think of as certain features of a typical Greco-Roman letter. James’ letter doesn’t have a specific thanksgiving, nor does it develop like Paul’s letters where it has a kind of a theological part followed by an exhortational part, but most of the letters you can read as models of typical first century Greco-Roman letters.

Impact on Interpretation

A couple of things to mention about as far as the impact this might have on interpretation is certainly it’s helpful to note if you’re interpreting a verse - where
it falls, in what section it falls in a letter. But number one - it seems to me what is most significant is when one of these elements is expanded, we shouldn’t be too surprised that Paul begins a letter by “to the church at wherever, greetings or grace and peace,” that shouldn’t shock us very much. It’s probably not that significant. But when he expands upon that, when we find him developing or expanding upon typical epistolary formulae, that might be significant and something you want to sit up and take notice of. So be aware of where Paul or one of the other authors expands - takes a typical element of a first-century letter and expands upon it – that might tell us something significant about what the author is emphasizing.

Galatians

Another thing might be, especially with Paul’s letters, when a certain feature of a first century letter is missing, and so, for example, when one reads the letter to the Galatians, one of the first things you recognize when reading that letter, especially if you’ve read Paul’s other letters, is that it is missing a thanksgiving. So that should be right after the salutation, the introduction and salutation, which intriguingly Paul expands. Notice it begins in chapter 1 verse 1, “Paul an apostle” to show you how both of these elements, expansion and also missing elements, how that might work. Chapter 1 of Galatians in verses 1 through 5, notice how the typical features of a first century letter get expanded: “Paul, an apostle sent not from men nor by men but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead, and all the brothers with me to the churches of Galatia.” Now notice how Paul’s identification as an apostle, which is typical in his letters, gets expanded. He describes that as sent not from human beings or by human beings but by Jesus Christ and God the Father. Paul seems to want to emphasize this. In fact, when you read the rest of the letter this seems to be one of the issues he must deal with. This seems to be one of the things that his opponents are calling into question, his apostolic authority. Now at the very outset of the letter he signals a key feature, a key theme, that he will deal with, is that his apostleship is not one
that comes about by human beings, but one that comes about by divine authority.

Then “to the churches of Galatia” that would not be surprising, but notice the last one “Grace and Peace to you;” a typical Pauline greeting, but notice how it gets expanded: “from God our Father and Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever, Amen.” And notice that long expansion which again I think is another key feature of the letter. Paul wants to demonstrate, or at this point Paul is assuming that his readers will understand and buy into the fact that they have been redeemed and rescued through the death of Christ from the present evil age.

In the rest of the letter of Galatians, Paul is going to place the Old Testament law within the category of the present evil age. Not that it’s bad or evil, but it’s just that the giving of the law took place before Jesus Christ and the age of the fulfillment and the Holy Spirit arrive. So if the readers have been rescued from the present evil age, why do they want to go back to it by submitting to the Mosaic Law that these Judaizers are trying to get them to submit to? So right at the beginning Paul is kind of getting the readers on his side and anticipating and arguing for key features, that his apostolic authority comes not from human beings but by God himself and that through Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, a new era has been inaugurated. His readers have been rescued from the present evil age, and have been therefore transferred into a new age, so why would they want to go back to the old age, which is characterized by or one of the characteristic features is submission to and domination by the Mosaic Law. So, already Paul is, in a sense, getting the upper hand of his argument. He’s anticipating the important features of his letter by how he’s expanded the typical greeting or salutation of a first century letter. So by paying attention to how the certain features are expanded can be important.
The last one is - we just said the second one is paying attention to what is deleted. Notice that between verses 5 and 6 what is missing is the typical thanksgiving. Verse 6 simply begins, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Jesus Christ.” It doesn’t take a lot of reflection to see perhaps why Paul skipped the thanksgiving; most likely he is so upset with the situation, it’s so urgent and perhaps he’s even so upset and astonished by what the readers are doing that he doesn’t have a lot to be thankful for. Not that he didn’t have anything to be thankful for but in a sense it is perhaps for shock value he just skips the thanksgiving where a reader might have expected one and jumps right into the heart of the problem. So again by paying attention to how certain features of a letter are expanded or developed or one that might even be missing, those are the times where you want to sit up and pay attention.

In our next session we’ll talk a little bit more about epistolary literature in the first century and how that might influence the way we read epistles and the truth of the epistles and letters. Then we’ll move onto the last literary type or genre in the New Testament which is the apocalypse or the book of Revelation.