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INTRODUCTION

This commentary is written from the perspective that Philippians was one letter, written by the Apostle Paul from Rome in the early 60s, to his longtime friends and compatriots in the gospel who lived in Philippi, an outpost of Rome in the interior plain of eastern Macedonia. The aim of this Introduction is to “introduce” both the *letter* as I see it and this *commentary* on the letter. Although the various critical questions that belong to such an introduction will be touched on, one will need to go to the more traditional NT Introductions for fuller treatment of many of these issues.¹ Here is what I perceive the letter to be about, which the commentary that follows will spell out in greater detail.

I. PHILIPPIANS AS A LETTER

It is common to “introduce” the Pauline letters by “reconstructing” the historical situation to which they were written. While that kind of reconstruction is extremely important for our understanding of Philippians (see section II below), here is a case where the question of “genre” must precede the questions of “history.”² Thus we will first look at the letter as a piece of first-century “literature.”

1. For a broad range of views on these matters, see the NT Introductions by Kümmel, 320-35; Guthrie, 541-63; Carson-Moo-Morris, 317-29. For an Introduction of a different kind, toward which I have personal proclivities, see L. T. Johnson, *Writings*, 338-49. Reading the chapters on Philippians in these volumes will give one a good sense of the issues as well as of different approaches.

2. I had already settled on this some months before I read Stowers, “Friends,” who argues essentially the same thing. I have learned much from this article, to which I am indebted for some of the insights presented here. Where I differ from Stowers is at the point of history. Although he brings the letter to bear on the situation in Philippi, he is much more interested

A. Philippians and Ancient Letter Writing

In contrast to many of Paul's other letters, especially the more polemical and/or apologetic letters such as Galatians and 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians reflects all the characteristics of a "letter of friendship," combined with those of a "letter of moral exhortation." Several matters point in this direction.

1. *Philippians as a Letter of Friendship.*³ Letter-writing, which was something of an "art" in pre-typewriter, pre-computer Western culture, was likewise taken with great seriousness by the ancient Greeks and Romans.⁴ Formal schooling would have included instruction in letter-writing.⁵ Two of the manuals for such instruction are extant, those by Pseudo-Demetrius and Pseudo-Libanius⁶ — although they were probably intended for professional scribes rather than for school children. That by Pseudo-Demetrius lists and offers illustrations of twenty-one different types of letters. The first of these, the "friendly type," was well known to all, and according to Cicero was the reason for the "invention of letter-writing."⁷ In many ways this is the most "artless" of the letters, since what are now known as "family letters" very often belong to it.⁸ Nonetheless, certain characteristics are discernible, and most of these fit very well with one dimension of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

First the theory, as illustrated by Pseudo-Demetrius' example "letter":

in the question of "genre" per se, so that one gets the feeling that the letter itself is "generic" in the sense that because it is a "hortatory letter of friendship," it could have been written to any of Paul's churches and come out pretty much the same way. Whereas I am equally convinced that it is a letter of friendship, I think it can only be understood as case specific, written to a very concrete situation in Philippi in the early 60s.

3. See also L. T. Johnson, *Writings*, 338-49; L. M. White, "Morality"; Stowers, "Friends."

4. On this matter, see esp. Malherbe, *Theorists*, 1-11, plus his many examples; S. Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 27-40; J. L. White, *Light*, 189-220; cf. n. 14.

5. See Malherbe, *Theorists*, 6-7; Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 32-35; White, *Light*, 189-90.

6. "Epistolary Types," by Pseudo-Demetrius (falsely attributed to Demetrius of Pharlerum, 4th c. BCE), cannot be dated with precision (from 2nd c. BCE to 2nd c. CE); for text and translation see Malherbe, *Theorists*, 30-41. "Epistolary Styles," by Pseudo-Libanius, dates from the 4th to 6th c. CE; for text and translation, see *ibid.*, 66-81. This work has expanded the list from 21 to 41. Interestingly, his first "type" is the "hortatory" letter; he lists the "friendly letter" as no. 7.

7. See n. 15 below.

8. It should be noted here, as Stowers points out (*Letter Writing*, 71), that the so-called "family letter," which abounds among the papyri, was not recognized as a distinct type by the ancient theorists. But that is because, as the illustration by Pseudo-Demetrius makes clear, the content of the so-called family letter belonged to the category of "friendly letter"; cf. Pseudo-Libanius, "the friendly style is that in which we exhibit simply friendship only."

PHILIPPIANS AS A LETTER

Even though I have been separated from you for a long time, I suffer this in body only. For I can never forget you or the impeccable way we were raised together from childhood up. Knowing that I myself am genuinely concerned about your affairs,⁹ and that I have worked unstintingly for what is most advantageous to you, I have assumed that you, too, have the same opinion of me, and will refuse me nothing. You will do well,¹⁰ therefore, to give close attention to the members of my household lest they need anything, to assist them in whatever they might need, and to write about whatever you should choose.

Although this illustration leans heavily toward the “reciprocation” of friendship (see next section), three features of this theoretical example are noteworthy for Philippians: (1) the note at the beginning that friendly letters are related to “absence” between friends (cf. Phil 1:27; 2:12); (2) that such letters are concerned with “the affairs” of both the sender and recipient (cf. Phil 1:12; 1:27; 2:19, 23); and (3) that the recipient “does well” in looking after the needs of the sender (cf. Phil 4:14).

More significantly, Loveday Alexander has recently subjected a series of “family letters” to an empirical “formal” analysis, and has shown, persuasively to my thinking, that a certain pattern emerges in these letters that is also in evidence in Philippians.¹¹ She isolates seven items, including the salutation and concluding greetings (I have put the corresponding parts of Philippians in brackets):¹²

1. The address and greeting [1:1-2]
2. Prayer for the recipients [1:3-11]
3. Reassurance about the sender (= “my affairs”) [1:12-26]
4. Request for reassurance about the recipients (= “your affairs”) [1:27-2:18; 3:1-4:3]
5. Information about movements of intermediaries [2:19-30]
6. Exchange of greetings with third parties [4:21-22]
7. Closing wish for health [4:23]

9. Gk. τὰ πρὸς σε; see n. 17 on 1:12.

10. Gk. καλῶς οὖν ποιήσεις; cf. on 4:14, but in the past tense.

11. See “Letter-Forms.” One needs to be properly cautious here, as to whether the “form” or the reality came first; i.e., whether a preexistent form determined how the letter was written, or the “form” is our discovery based on empirical data (cf. Alexander, 88-89). Surely in this case it is the latter.

12. I should note here that I read Dr. Alexander’s article after I had written the commentary, with the present outline already in hand. Her analysis has given clear evidence that this general pattern had already existed in some of the “family letters” from among the papyri.

It will also be recognized that 3:1-4:9 and 4:10-20 do not easily fit the scheme. While

There is also evidence for leaving a “thanksgiving” until the end¹³ — although in Philippians this is more likely a matter of rhetoric than of letter form (see on 4:10-20). The point to make is that at the “formal” level much of Philippians is explicable as a letter of friendship, of the “friendly, familial type.”¹⁴

On the other hand, Cicero considers “friendly letters” such as those noted in the papyri as not worthy of correspondence between true friends, since most of the former deal with mundane matters, while letters between friends should engage in conversation about weightier issues.¹⁵ Thus what we have in Philippians is a letter that has the *formal* character — and the “logic” — of a “friendly” or “family” letter; whereas in terms of *content* it carries on conversation at a much deeper level of friendship.

But “friendship” itself, of the kind Cicero was talking about, was another matter that the Greeks and Romans took with a kind of seriousness most moderns can scarcely appreciate. Since there are several indications within our letter that Paul understood his relationship with the Philippians to be a modified expression of “friendship,” a brief overview of this phenomenon is also necessary in order for us to understand Paul’s letter to them.

2. *Friendship in the Greco-Roman World.*¹⁶ As with most ancient societies friendship played a primary role in basic societal relationships in the Greco-Roman world, including politics and business. So important was this matter that it became a regular topic of philosophical discussions. Aristotle devoted a considerable section of his *Nicomachean Ethics* to a discussion of friendship, while Cicero and Plutarch have entire treatises on the topic, and

some see this as evidence for dismembering our present letter into three (see below, pp. 21-23), I have argued in the commentary, on the basis of content and the striking parallels between chaps. 2 and 3, that there are better solutions as to how these sections fit in. See the discussion below (pp. 37-39).

13. Cf. Alexander, “Letter-Forms,” 97-98.

14. Stowers (“Friends,” 107) points out that this has long been recognized by classicists dealing with ancient letter writing (e.g., Koskenniemi, *Studien*, 115-27; Thräde, *Grundzüge*).

15. Cicero, *Fam.* 2.4.1: “Letter writing was invented just in order that we might *inform those at a distance* if there were anything which it was important for them or for ourselves that they should know. A letter of this kind you will of course not expect from me; for as regards *your own affairs* you have your correspondents and messengers at home, while as regards *mine* there is absolutely no news to tell you” (LCL, 25.101; cited also in Malherbe, *Theorists*, 21; emphases mine, to show the ties with Pseudo-Demetrius noted above). Cicero then goes on to indicate that he intends to write on “something more serious.”

16. For discussions in the secondary literature, see Saller, *Personal Patronage*, 7-39; P. Marshall, *Enmity*, 1-34; Stowers, “Friends,” 107-14. Among the primary sources, see Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.*, Book 8; Cicero, *Amicitia*; Seneca, *Ep. Mor.* 11; Plutarch, *De Amic. Mult.*