

THE RELATIONAL MATRIX OF THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

TOM THATCHER*

A popular introduction to hermeneutics defines "exegesis" as "the attempt to hear the Word as the original recipients were to have heard it, to find out what was the *original intent*" of the author.¹ Traditional exegesis relies on a passage's *Sitz im Leben*, which must be synthesized in terms of setting, date and similar concrete categories. The pastoral epistles, however, elude any neat attempt at contextualization. At best they speak from the silence of Paul's later life; at worst they emerge from the dim recesses of the early Church. Thus exegesis proceeds with highly individual reconstructions that rely on theological, linguistic and historical approaches to the problem of "occasion."²

Recent interdisciplinary trends offer a new perspective on the exegetical matrix of the pastorals. Comparison with ancient epistolary conventions can create a neutral rhetorical background that defines the audience anticipated by the text. The relationship between the author and this "implied audience" provides insight into the functional purpose of the letters. I will approach the context question via the conventions of ancient epistolary rhetoric with a view to reconstructing the rhetorical setting of the pastoral epistles.

The ancient letter was seen as a direct substitute for spoken conversation between parties who were spatially distant. This portrayal is evident in ancient theory and practice. In theory it led to an insistence that the letter convey the author's "true self."³ In practice the "substitute" concept generated a "surrogate presence" motif, more common among cultured writers but traceable even in the Egyptian papyri. Thus Cicero tells Atticus that he writes "because I feel as though I were talking to you" and elsewhere thanks Marcus for news: "All of you was revealed to me in your letter."⁴ Stanley Stowers concludes that the epistle "fictionalized personal presence."⁵

* Tom Thatcher is an instructor in New Testament studies at Cincinnati Bible Seminary, 2700 Glenway Avenue, Cincinnati, OH 45204.

¹ G. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 21.

² W. G. Kümmel's *Introduction to the New Testament* concludes that "the Pastorals cannot be Pauline letters and therefore are pseudonymous writings" (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975) 384-385. Those who advocate Pauline authorship remain unable to situate the letters within his career. Cf. e.g. D. Guthrie: "The chronology of the closing period of Paul's life is too obscure to attach a definite dating to any of these Epistles" (*New Testament Introduction* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1970] 623).

³ Demetrius affirms the importance of character revelation: *schodon gar eikona hekastos tēs heautou psychēs graphei tēn epistolēn* (*On Style* 4.227 [LCL]).

⁴ Cicero *Ad Atticum* 12.53 (LCL); *Ad Familiaris* 16.16.2 (LCL).

⁵ S. Stowers, "Social Typification and the Classification of Ancient Letters," *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism* (ed. J. Neusner et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 79.

This aspect of the ancient letter, however, interacts with the complex nature of presence in a patronage society. As even published letters must posit a (fictional) social matrix, publication does not transcend David Aune's conclusion that "the social status and relationship of sender and receiver will inevitably influence both *what* is said and *how* it is said."⁶ Such is evident in Pseudo-Demetrius' handbook, which describes a number of letter types in which even content builds on the past relationship between sender and reader. This manual illustrates a general tendency to categorize letters on the basis of exhortational context rather than form.⁷ The ancient letter was formulated within a presumed relational matrix.

Formal features developed within the genre to define the relationship. The major contributor to this area of epistolary research has been John L. White, who has concluded that "the general nature of the relationship between reader and recipient is conveyed by the opening and closing"⁸ of the ancient letter. Prescriptive opening and closing conventions developed to address the stock interactions (friend-friend, patron-client, parent-child, and so on) of the rigid social structure. Consequently modifications of the conventional opening/closing formulae may be construed as an explicit attempt to highlight some unique feature of the relationship between writer and reader.⁹ Before I apply this principle to the pastorals, it will be helpful to briefly describe the conventional formal elements of the opening and closing sections of Hellenistic letters.

The opening of the private letter generally includes a prescript (superscription, adscription, salutation), health wish (*hygiainein*), and prayer formula (*proskynēma*).¹⁰ The prescript was the most formulaic feature of the Hellenistic letter. The basic Greek formula is "X (nominative) Y (dative) *chairein*," where X is the sender and Y the recipient. The relationship may be heightened "by the addition of appropriate words to the salutation."¹¹ In general, embellishment of the names or the basic greeting served

⁶ D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 158. See also S. Stowers' discussion of the major social relationships that influenced epistolary practice (*Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986] 27).

⁷ See "friendly" (*philikos*), "blaming" (*memptikos*), "reproachful" (*oneidistikos*), "accounting" (*aitiologikos*), "accusing" (*katēgorikos*), "apologetic" (*apologētikos*), "ironic" (*eirōnikos*), and "thankful" (*apeicharistikos*) letters—at least eight of Demetrius' twenty-one types. Stowers describes all epistolary handbooks as "chiefly occupied with depicting social situations" ("Typification" 80) and elsewhere states that "the concept of epistolary types provided the ancient writer with a taxonomy of letters according to typical actions performed in corresponding social contexts and occasions" (*Letter Writing* 56).

⁸ J. L. White, *Light From Ancient Letters* (FFNT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 198. White's conclusion is supported by the absence of opening and closing conventions in the sample letters of the handbooks, which explicitly summarize the rhetorical relationship before presenting an appropriate body format.

⁹ See F. X. J. Exler: "the familiar relationship existing between the writer and . . . correspondent was frequently expressed by the addition of appropriate words to the opening formula" (*The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter: A Study in Greek Epistolography* [Washington: Catholic University, 1923] 133). Note Demetrius' call for the use of plain and unadorned style in letters, a doctrine that such modifications violate (*On Style* 4.228–235).

¹⁰ See J. M. Lieu, "'Grace to You and Peace': The Apostolic Greeting," *BJRL* 68 (1985) 162–163; Aune, *Environment* 163; Stowers, *Letter Writing* 20.

¹¹ Exler, *Form* 62; see also White, *Light* 200.

to intensify the relationship. Less stereotyped is the health wish, which involves an expression of concern over the reader and/or a report on the writer's condition. The health wish evidences broad formulaic diversity, suggesting a high level of personalization.¹² It led ultimately to the creation of the *proskynēma*, a prayer for obtaining the desired good health.

The epistolary closing consists of secondary greetings and a farewell formula.¹³ Closing conventions, though less prominent, were also stereotypical. Two basic elements appear in Greek letters: secondary greetings, and a closing word. The former are offered in an *aspaxomai* formula that signals the end of the body of the letter.¹⁴ Such greetings could be from the writer to parties with the reader or to the reader from parties with the writer. The normal closing word in private letters is *errōso*. Modifications in closing conventions are less common.

The opening and closing sections of the pastoral epistles vary considerably from the standard formulae. This suggests a calculated focus toward certain aspects of the author/reader relationship. For convenience the terms "Paul," "Timothy" and "Titus," with corresponding masculine pronouns, will refer to the implied author and readers of the pastoral letters.

The opening section of 1 Timothy reveals a high degree of embellishment. The nominative sender is identified via an authority epithet, *apostolos*, which is then developed with a creedal formula. Paul explicitly associates his apostolic authority with *Christou Iēsou*, then claims that his commission is *kat' epitagēn* of God and, again, Christ. These devices highlight authority but are somewhat tempered by the descriptions of God and Christ as *Sōtēros hēmōn* and *elpidos hēmōn*. The repeated plural pronoun suggests a solidarity, based on the soteriological implications of "Savior" and "hope." Moving to the adscript, we note that the reader appears first as a dative proper name and is then elaborated with *gnēsiō teknō en pistei*. The familial *teknon* for an apparent nonrelative follows common Greek practice and highlights the closeness of the correspondents. The adjective *gnēsios*, here conveying the idea of legitimacy, highlights this sentiment with reference to the recipient's loyalty. The greeting builds on a wordplay of the typical *chairein*, using *charis* with "mercy and peace." Functionally the greeting triad serves as a spiritual *hygiainein* with an implied prayer optative, expressing Paul's concern for Timothy's well-being. A second *Theou kai Christou* elaborates the greeting/prayer by naming the common source of the desired blessings, now *Theou Patros* and *Iēsou tou Kyriou*. Commonality is highlighted again by the closing plural pronoun *hymōn*.

The closing section of 1 Timothy is, by contrast, brief and incidental. *Ē charis meth' hymōn* also mentions grace in an implied prayer construction but shifts to the second person. In this letter, then, most of the relational work is done by the opening. Overall, these conventions are used to create

¹² The health formula generally uses *errysthai* or *hygiainein*, often with intensifying modifiers. In many cases it appears in combination with the greeting: *chairein kai hygiainein* (see White, *Light* 200).

¹³ Aune, *Environment* 164. Secondary greetings may also appear as an opening convention but in either position serve a relational function.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

a tone of authority that is tempered by the recipient's assumed loyalty and by common divine blessing.

The opening verses of 2 Timothy use variant terminology but are functionally similar to the first epistle. Paul again claims the authority epithet *apostolos*, confessionally elaborated by reference to God and "Christ Jesus." The authority of his calling is stressed by *dia thelēmatos*, which, like *kat' epitagēn* in 1 Tim 1:1, highlights divine selection. In 2 Timothy the *kata* construction refers to Christ, who is now associated with the blessing *zōē*. Timothy is again the dative recipient with a familial epithet, but here described as *agapētos*. Whereas *gnēsios* in 1 Tim 1:2 highlighted the relationship in terms of Timothy's feelings for Paul, *agapētos* stresses Paul's love for the reader. The affectionate tone again tempers the authority claim and carries into the identical greeting/prayer.

The close of 2 Timothy is notable for its well-developed *aspaxomai* section. This includes greetings to specific persons with Timothy, a general greeting to a corporate body (*oikos*), a health report, greetings from specific persons with Paul, and a general greeting formula ("and all the brothers"). Paul assumes a common concern for common friends, thereby stressing mutuality. The farewell is elaborated. Before repeating the *charis* statement Paul includes another prayer for the Lord's blessing on Timothy, here singled out by *sou*. Overall, the opening and closing sections of 2 Timothy communicate the writer's love and concern for the recipient and for the recipient's spiritual health.

The opening section of Titus is dominated by an intricate superscription combining titles and creedal statements. Paul identifies himself first as *doulos*, then *apostolos*, and finally as one "entrusted" (*episteuthēn egō*) with the gospel. *Doulos Theou* connects the writer with God, but within a context of submission and service. A number of creedal concepts appear in the elaboration of *apostolos*: faith, election, knowledge of truth, piety, hope of eternal life. His calling is again associated with the divine order of *Sōtēros hēmōn Theou*. Such rhapsodizing combines an authority claim with a celebration of the benefits of a common Christian heritage. Like Timothy, the dative recipient Titus is also called *gnēsiō teknō*, now *kata koinēn pistin*. The greeting/prayer asks that Titus receive "grace and peace," with God the Father and Christ (now the *Sōtēr*) as dispensers of blessing. A first-plural pronoun again closes the greeting.

Titus closes with a brief though multidirectional *aspaxomai* formula (3:15). The sender of greetings is a nonspecific group, and the recipient of Paul's greeting is the equally vague *tous philountas hēmas en pistei*. This very general terminology functions to further express Paul's personal goodwill toward Titus as an individual. The opening and closing formulae of Titus thus betray a strong emphasis on mutuality, here a mutuality based on concern and on a common perception of the Christian faith.

In conclusion, modifications to the opening and closing sections of the pastoral epistles evidence an attempt to create a specific rhetorical relationship with the reader. This relationship is characterized by (1) humble authority on the part of the writer, "Paul"; (2) intense loyalty toward

“Paul” on the part of the reader, “Timothy/Titus”; (3) genuine mutual concern between the communicants; (4) a common faith experience as the basis of this authority, loyalty and concern. This may tentatively be regarded as the rhetorical occasion of the pastoral epistles, historical questions notwithstanding.