

Prayer and Epistolarity:
The Function of Prayer in the Pauline Letter Structure

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1. Introduction

The abundant presence of prayer elements in the introductory and concluding parts of Paul's letters cannot escape the notice of even the most cursory reader. But what is the meaning and function of this phenomenon? What contribution does it make to the way we interpret each letter as a whole?

In a previous article I have attempted to demonstrate the importance of the epistolary situation as primary interpretive framework for epistolary literature. In assessing the role of the prayer passages in the letters, we therefore have to interpret all the diverse references to prayer against the background of the particular epistolary situation; at an even more fundamental level, we should note that some prayer passages stand in an even more direct relation to the epistolarity of the letters, in that they serve to create that epistolary situation.

In order to ascertain in a satisfactory way the meaning of the latter group of prayer passages, we have to confront the following questions:

- (1) What are the areas of interrelationship between prayer and epistolarity?
- (2) Is it possible to identify a specifically Pauline letter form over against a Hellenistic letter form?
- (3) What is the nature of the epistolary situation projected by Paul's letters, and what is the part played by prayer in this situation?

2. The interrelationship between prayer and epistolarity

- 2.1 Prayer in the letter structure
- 2.2 Reader-consciousness: the I-you primacy
- 2.3 Contingency: the I-you particularity
- 2.4 Convergence of themes

3. Paul and the letter form

- 3.1 Extent of standardization in Hellenistic letters
- 3.2 Paul's adaptation of the letter form

4. Prayer in the letter-opening

- 4.1 The Pauline prescript
- 4.2 The Pauline introductory thanksgiving

5. Prayer in the letter-closing

5.1 The Hellenistic letter-closing

5.2 Concluding elements of the Pauline letters

6. Paul's reinterpretation of the epistolary situation

6.1 Relationships

6.2 Presence

6.3 Temporal framework

6.4 Polarity

6.5 Letter frame and letter body

6.6 The epistolary situation as interpretation of the "real" situation

6.7 Conclusion