

Reading Paul's Letters:  
Epistolarity and the Epistolary Situation

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In order to give a viable interpretation of any literary work, including Biblical literature, due attention has to be paid to its genre and the interpretive framework that its generic affiliation suggests to the reader. In the case of Paul's letters the reader has to ask: What is the character of these writings? What does communication between him and his readers? What are the constraints to which this form of communication subjects its author and readers? How does the epistolary frame affect our interpretation of the contents of the letters?

In this article we will first review various attempts to define the nature of epistolarity and then highlight the importance of the (textually based) epistolary situation as primary interpretive context for the contents of letters in general, including then the Pauline correspondence.

The outline of this article:

1. Deissmann and his legacy
2. Koskenniemi: the idea of the letter
3. Altman: the epistolary genre
  - (1) Particularity of the I-you
  - (2) The pivotal and impossible present
  - (3) Temporal polyvalence
  - (4) The epistolary dialogue
    - a. Reader-consciousness
    - b. Present-consciousness
    - c. Polar-consciousness
4. The Epistolary situation