

The Early History of the New Testament as a Book Production, Collection and Circulation

Introduction

The study of the New Testament from a history of books perspective broaches many potential fields of discovery that go well beyond the limits of this paper. The New Testament, like the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) before it is really a collection of books rather than a single book. This library of ancient material would require a book (or series of books) to cover all of the relevant topics, even in limiting the scope of the study to the earliest church. As a result this paper will only introduce the New Testament as a book in the most general terms and then will attempt to focus on the writings of a single New Testament author, the Apostle Paul, in the first century after his writings.

The New Testament as a Library

The New Testament is composed of twenty seven documents written over a period of approximately fifty years during the second half of the first century. In essence the New Testament is a library of books considered to have been Scripture for the early church.

The first four documents in the New Testament are known as the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). The word *gospel* is from the Greek *εὐαγγέλιον*, meaning “good news.” The term originally referred to a good news message of a victory in politics or battle. Here, the meaning is similar. Mark adopted the meaning (1:14-15) to refer to the good news from Jesus or about Jesus.

While the Gospels are similar in some ways to ancient biographies, they are often different in others.¹ Very little is told of 90% of Jesus’ life. The vast majority of the Gospels cover the last three years of Jesus’ life with extra emphasis placed on the last week. The Gospels have very little of the political commentary or hyperbole that was found in ancient biographies. In place of these elements the Gospels have theological arrangement and presentation. Perhaps the best term for the genre of the Gospels is *Theological Biography*.²

The Gospels are followed by the book of Acts. The book of Acts is unique in its genre in the New Testament.³ The book of Acts falls into the

¹ The most recent scholarly discussion on Gospel genre can be found in Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992.)

² William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, revised edition (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 401.

³ Unless, of course, Luke is included with Acts in genre as Ben Witherington III, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 22-26. Most scholars, however, include Luke in the genre of *bios* (Greco-Roman biography) or in a unique genre of theological biography as in Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, Jr., 401.

genre of ancient historiography.⁴ Historiography focuses on events, rather than on persons and attempts to provide possible interpretations of the events.⁵ There are several important differences to note between modern historical works and ancient historiography⁶:

1. Ancient historiography is not concerned with chronological accuracy. Events are often arranged thematically, rather than chronologically.
2. Ancient historiography is not concerned with comprehensive presentations. Events are chosen that have great significance or are representative of the overall situation.
3. Modern historical works make at least an attempt to be unbiased in their presentations. Ancient historiography makes no such attempts.
4. Most modern historical works take as a pre-supposition naturalism. All events are ascribed to purely natural causes. Ancient works of history often attributed events to God or the gods.
5. Ancient history included much more rhetoric than we would expect in modern works, as the authors attempt to present the history with apologetic purposes.
6. Greek historians had a practice of presenting history geographically or by ethnic group. This practice is clearly adapted in Luke-Acts.

Luke's presentation in Acts is very similar to Greek historiography. In addition to the elements mentioned above several others are similar to ancient historiography⁷:

- The prologue is a typical prologue for a historical work.
- The dating of events by the reign of government officials.
- The use of summary statements throughout the work to serve as transitions.
- Firsthand involvement in the historical narrative (the "we" passages).

The style, language and themes of God's plan and work in Acts also show an indebtedness to Jewish historiography. While the book is unique in the New Testament canon, it would not be an unusual book to first-century Greek or Jewish readers. Readers would have recognized the presentation, style, language, arrangement and rhetoric as normal

⁴ On Acts as a work of ancient historiography see especially Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990) and Darryl W. Palmer, "Acts and the Ancient Historical Monograph" in Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, eds., *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1-30.

⁵ Witherington, *New Testament History*, 24.

⁶ Adapted from Witherington, *New Testament History*, 26.

⁷ Adapted from David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 349.

historiography elements. Perhaps Acts can best be described as being in the genre of theological historiography.

Following the books of Acts in the modern New Testament canon are the epistles. Epistles comprise a significant portion of the New Testament. The epistle genre includes Paul's thirteen letters, as well as Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John. With 20 of the 27 New Testament books falling into the epistle genre we can clearly see the importance of this genre to the early church as church leaders (apostles) used letters to communicate with churches spread out throughout the Mediterranean region.⁸

Ancient letters tended to be very formulaic. Ancient letters generally included the following components⁹:

1. *The salutation.* Comprised by a reference to the author and the audience.
2. *Greeting.* Usually a very simple phrase of greeting ("Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" Phil. 1:2).
3. *Thanksgiving and/or prayer.* One or both of these elements is found in all of Paul's letters except Galatians (with purpose). This element was often missing in secular letters.
4. *Body.* This is usually the longest portion of the letter. The main ideas are presented and defended in the body of the letter.
5. *Exhortation.* This is an appeal to conform behavior to the main points addressed in the body of the letter.
6. *Conclusion.*¹⁰ The conclusion often included a wish for peace, greeting, autograph, and/or benediction.

The final book in the New Testament canon is Revelation. The book of Revelation is essentially a compilation of seven epistles written to churches in Asia Minor, combined with a series of visions written in the genre of apocalyptic literature.¹¹ "Apocalyptic" comes from the Greek meaning "revelation." As a biblical genre apocalyptic literature is similar in many ways to prophecy. Both genres are revelations from God concerning what God is going to do. There are, however, several important differences between prophecy and apocalyptic literature. The

⁸ The book of Jude can also probably be included here making the number 21 of 27. Jude can also be considered an apocalyptic work.

⁹ On ancient letters see especially, Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), and M. Luther Stirewalt, *Paul, the Letter Writer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.)

¹⁰ On Paul's closings, see especially, Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) and Gordon J. Bahr, "The Subscriptions in the Pauline Letters" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87 (1968), 27-41.

¹¹ On the New Testament and the apocalyptic genre see especially Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) and Paul S. Minear, *New Testament Apocalyptic* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981.)

key differences are that God is dealing with sin in general in apocalyptic and sin in a particular people in prophecy. In prophecy God speaks directly through a prophet with the goal of repentance and in apocalyptic literature God speaks through an intermediary using symbolic language with the goal of warning and encouraging his people to persevere. Apocalyptic literature tells of God acting in the world in a dramatic fashion to bring an end to evil and sin.

Common Characteristics of the New Testament Documents

While the bulk of this paper will focus on the Pauline corpus, there are several physical characteristics that are common to all twenty seven of the New Testament documents.

Each of the documents of the New Testament was written in Koine Greek.¹² Koine Greek was the common dialect of Greek used in the Ancient world between 330 B.C.E. and 330 C.E. While the Jews of Palestine were still using Aramaic (and some Hebrew) in the first century, the Jews of the Diaspora, to whom the New Testament is primarily directed (along with Gentile believers) were more fluent in Koine Greek. Koine Greek bridged the gap between Classical Greek (900-330 B.C.E.) and Byzantine Greek (330-1453 C.E.) During the first century, when the New Testament documents were written, Koine Greek was the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean world.

It is fairly well accepted that papyrus¹³ was the medium that was used for most, if not all of the original autographs¹⁴ of the New Testament,¹⁵ though it is not impossible that parchment may have been used for a few. The author of 2 John gives us a clue to his use of papyrus as he writes, “I have much to say to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.”¹⁶

Papyrus was made from the Papyrus reeds that grow in Egypt along the banks of the Nile. Strips were cut from the reed about as long as a man’s arm and two inches wide. These strips were laid side by side, with a second layer of reeds set on top at right angles. As the reeds were pressed or beaten the cellulose formed a natural glue that formed a sheet of the pressed leaves. The sheet was then polished with a shell forming a

¹² See Gerard Mussies, “Languages (Greek)” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), IV:195-203 and the references included there.

¹³ On papyrus see especially Richard Parkinson and Stephen Quirke, *Papyrus* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995.) On the use of papyrus in the production of the New Testament see T. C. Skeat, “Early Christian Book-production: Papyri and Manuscripts” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), II:54-79 and Andre Lemaire, “Writing and Writing Materials” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), VI:999-1008.

¹⁴ An “autograph” is the original document written by the author or secretary.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 5th ed. (London: Marshall Pickering, 1991), 6.

¹⁶ 2 John 12. All Bible quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated. The word translated “paper” here is the Greek *χαρτης* (*chartes*), a roll of papyrus.

smooth writing surface. The resulting sheet of papyrus was usually around 8 by 10 inches with horizontal strips on the recto side and vertical strips on the verso. The sheets were then usually glued together into a roll of around twenty feet (known as a *chartes*).

Papyrus afforded the author and recipients the convenience of a lightweight, readily available material that could be easily joined into scrolls or codices. Papyrus, however, was not nearly as durable as other writing materials (namely parchment and clay) and as a result we have no original autographs of New Testament documents. To date the oldest known New Testament document is a papyrus fragment (P⁵²) from around 125 C.E. that contains a few verses of John chapter 18. While parchment was the preferred writing material for the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament authors chose papyrus, perhaps for its availability and relative inexpensive cost as compared to parchment.

During the first century black ink was the most common ink, though red was also available. Black ink was made from lamp black or ground charcoal that was mixed with gum arabic. While black ink was cheap, durable and easy to make, it was not water resistant.¹⁷

Pens were readily available and cheap. The most common pen was made from a small reed, about 8 to 10 inches long, from the *Juncus Martimus* plant. The reed was sharpened at one end, with a small slit cut in the sharpened end.¹⁸

The materials used to actually write the documents of the New Testament were not significantly different than the tools that would have been used only a hundred years ago – paper, ink, pen. Slight technology advances have improved the materials, but until the invention of the typewriter and later, the computer, the tools were primarily unchanged.

One major difference between writing in antiquity and more recent writing is the surface chosen to write on. While tables were readily available for eating and other purposes, scribes do not seem to have regularly used tables for writing.¹⁹ For quick notes and short letters the scribe would stand while holding a wax tablet or papyrus sheet and palette in one hand and the reed in the other. A wet rag was tied around the waist to correct any quick mistakes.²⁰ For longer letters the scribe would sit on a stool, bench or the ground and stretch his robes tightly across his knees to form a hard surface upon which he could write.²¹

¹⁷ Richards, *Paul*, 47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Bruce Metzger, “When Did Scribes Begin to Use Writing Desks?” in *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish and Christian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 123.

²⁰ Richards, *Paul*, 54.

²¹ Metzger, 123-125.

*The Canonization of the New Testament*²²

Canon is a word meaning “rule” or “standard.” In biblical discussions the canon refers to the set list of books that make up the Bible. Mankind does not actually determine the canon. This is pre-determined by God. It is only given to man to recognize the canon. The discussion of canon is particularly important since Christians still don’t agree entirely on which books make up the Bible.

Even before the New Testament was complete, later authors were referring to earlier New Testament writings as Scripture (2 Peter 3:15.) Early Christian fathers such as Irenaeus, Ignatius and Tertullian were already putting New Testament writings on an equal level with Old Testament Scriptures. Despite this high view of New Testament writings, there was no fixed list early on of the books that actually made up the New Testament.

The first to develop such a list was Marcion. Marcion was a mid-second century leader who saw the God of the Old Testament as a separate, lower God than the God of the New Testament. As a result he rejected the Old Testament and any Jewish references in the New Testament. His resulting canon consisted of an edited Luke and ten of Paul’s letters (all except 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus).

A second internal pressure began to build in the church during the second century as Montanus and his prophetesses claimed to be delivering new revelation from the Holy Spirit. In addition to this group claiming new revelation, other writings, works and “gospels” were making claims of inspiration, either internally or externally (e.g. The Gospel of Thomas, The Shepherd of Hermes). Many churches were confused as to which books were authoritative to be used in setting church doctrine, liturgy and discipline. Finally, the church was also plagued with the external pressures of persecution. Believers were being tortured and killed for possessing “Christian Scriptures”, as a result it became important to know which books were worthy of suffering persecution.

The church began to debate and develop the recognition of the canon by using four basic rules for canonicity.

1. Inspiration. For the book to be considered Scripture it must show evidence of inspiration from the Holy Spirit.
2. Apostolicity. For a book to be considered Scripture it must have been written or associated with an Apostle.

²² On the canonization of the New Testament see especially Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) and Arthur Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament: Origin, Collection, Text and Canon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995.)

3. Catholicity. For a book to be considered Scripture it must be used fairly universally in the church.
4. Antiquity. For a book to be considered Scripture it must have been written in the first century.

The first work to actually list the 27 books of the New Testament as we now know them was the Athanasius Easter Letter of 367 C.E., but the debate continued for generations over exactly which books were to be included. Even as late as Martin Luther (16th century) the books were being debated. For example, Luther himself questioned the canonicity of Jude, James, Hebrews and Revelation.

Paul's Letters

When we speak of “Paul’s Letters” in this project we are referring to the thirteen epistles that have been traditionally ascribed to him. Throughout much of history it has been generally well accepted among scholars and theologians that Paul wrote Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon.

All of the issues discussed above concerning characteristics common to the New Testament documents, would also, of course apply to the Pauline writings.

Location of Composition

While modern images of an author bring to mind a cozy, private office, with desk, chair, books and writing materials, this most certainly would not have been the case for the composition of Paul’s letters. Paul’s primary missionary activity took place from 34-62 C.E.²³ During this time Paul traveled around Damascus and Arabia (the site of his conversion), Jerusalem, Syrian Antioch, Tarsus (his hometown) and partook in at least three missionary journeys. All of the thirteen letters under consideration in this paper were written during the final decade of this span, during which time Paul was involved in his missionary journeys. These journeys stretched throughout Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Macedonia and Achaia.²⁴ It is likely that some of the letters were also written while Paul

²³ While these dates are debated I am following the chronology of Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostle: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 81-82. An especially helpful work on the debate surrounding the chronology of Paul’s life is Rainer Riesner, *Paul’s Early Period: Chronology, Mission, Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.)

²⁴ There are many useful works on the life and journeys of Paul. Particularly helpful works include Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, translated by M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897.)

was imprisoned at the end of his journeys. Paul's extensive traveling schedule required that he was often between extended stays. As a result Paul was likely to have written while on extended stays in urban centers around the Mediterranean (such as Philippi, Ephesus and Corinth), while imprisoned under house arrest, and during shorter stays in more rural settings while traveling. Writing material was lightweight and compact. The palette, reeds, ink, papyrus roll and any needed notebooks could be easily carried and used while traveling. So the mechanics of writing would not have required long stays in comfortable surroundings.

While even most modern scholars imagine Paul writing only during extended stays in the home of a host, writing while traveling was not uncommon in antiquity. We have reports of many writers in antiquity writing while journeying from one location to another, including Julius Caesar,²⁵ Pliny the Elder²⁶, Pliny the Younger²⁷, and Cicero.²⁸ Perhaps the closest parallel to Paul's literary career is that of the early second century bishop Ignatius, who wrote several epistles that are similar in length, content and style while journeying to Rome for his eventual martyrdom.²⁹

Did Paul Use Notes?

It was quite common for writers in ancient times to use notes. Notes would be written on wooden or wax tablets and several tablets would be tied together to form a codex. Notebooks were also constructed from parchment, which could be easily scraped and reused. This may have been the preferred type of notebook by the time of Paul's writings.³⁰

Notes could be taken for rough drafts, early ideas that needed to be worked through, or for bits of information pulled forth from works that had been read. Pliny the Younger describes his uncle as constantly reading with a scribe nearby to take notes.³¹ Cicero was known to have first composed rough drafts of letters before writing the final form.³² This was thought to have been the common practice for letters intended to be read in public, such as Paul's writings.³³

Paul's letters were clearly intended to be read publicly and hence they probably took more thought to develop. Also, Paul clearly occasionally uses pre-existing material through Old Testament quotations and the use of occasional hymns in his epistles. These two lines of

²⁵ Plutarch, *Caesar*, 17.4-5.

²⁶ Pliny, *Epistulae*, 3.5.

²⁷ Pliny, *Epistulae*, 9.36.

²⁸ Cicero, *Atticus*, 5.17.1.

²⁹ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 3.36.3-10. The epistles of Ignatius can be found in Ignatius of Antioch, *The Letters of Ignatius in The Apostolic Fathers*, 2 vols, trans. by Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977.)

³⁰ C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, 2nd ed. (London: oxford, 1983), 15-23.

³¹ Pliny *Epistulae*, 3.5.15-16.

³² R. Tyrrell and L. Purser, *The Correspondence of M. Tullius Cicero* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1901-1933), 4:419.

³³ Richards, *Paul*, 56.

argument suggest that Paul almost certainly used notes and notebooks in the composition of his letters.

Finally, there is an interesting side-note in one of Paul's letters that may indicate more clearly that Paul utilized notes in his writings. In 2 Timothy 4:13 Paul is writing from prison to his friend and co-worker Timothy. Timothy is preparing to visit Paul and Paul writes, "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments." The word translated "parchments" here is the Greek *membranas*.³⁴ This was the word used for notebooks constructed of parchment.³⁵ Most likely these "*membranas*" contained notes that Paul had collected for possible inclusion in future letters. Paul was especially concerned that Timothy bring these notebooks to him.

Paul's Use of A Secretary

There is little doubt that Paul used a secretary regularly in his writings. Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 3:17, "I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write." So, clearly Paul followed the normal Greco-Roman practice of allowing the secretary to write the bulk of the letter and then adding a post-script greeting in his own hand. We see other indications of this, whether explicitly or implicitly, in various other Pauline letters.³⁶ In one letter we actually see the appearance of the secretary in the letter: "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord."³⁷

Secretaries were regularly available for employment in the market places of large cities. Paul could have easily employed a secretary from any of the large urban centers that he visited on his missionary journeys. Paul could also have "borrowed" the secretary of a rich patron or he could have simply used one of his educated traveling companions in this role.

There was a wide range of ways in which a secretary could be used.³⁸ This would often vary depending on the importance of the letter and the literacy of the author. Some secretaries were given much freedom and were essentially the actual composer of the document in question, while other secretaries were merely dictation takers. Ultimately, however, the author was responsible for the letter down to the smallest detail. The author would thus carefully read the document before sending the document. If corrections were needed the letter could be corrected by the secretary, the author or even rewritten entirely if necessary. Once the document was written to the satisfaction of the author, the author would often put in a personal note of greeting before the letter was sent.

³⁴ The last clause in Greek reads, "και τα βιβλια μαλιστα τας μεμβρανας."

³⁵ See, T. C. Skeat, "Especially the Parchments: a Note on 2 Timothy IV.13." *Journal of Theological Studies* 30 (1979): 172-77.

³⁶ Galatians 6:11, 1 Corinthians 16:21, Colossians 4:18, Philemon 19.

³⁷ Romans 16:22.

³⁸ See especially, E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1991.)

The fact that Paul seems to have had a high level of literacy and was certainly capable of writing at least the post-scripts suggests that the secretary probably had to “compose” less for Paul, rather than simply perform scribal functions for Paul. This does not mean that Paul completely composed every single word of every letter bearing his name. We have already seen that he allowed his secretary to send a personal greeting and Paul also lists co-authors in several of his letters.

The extent that co-authors played in the composition of Paul’s letters is impossible to determine. Probably co-authors are more involved in some letters than in others. In the letter to Philemon Paul includes Timothy as a co-author, but then writes a very personal letter that includes many commands and appeals to Philemon that would not make sense coming from anyone other than Paul alone. In the first letter to the Thessalonians Paul includes Timothy and Silas as co-authors and writes primarily from a first-person plural perspective, while occasionally switching to first-person singular when the context determines that only Paul is speaking at that point.

The indication then is that Paul used secretaries and co-authors and probably allowed some input from both. The final authority and responsibility for the letter, however, would have rested with Paul.

In addition to actually writing the letter for the author, the secretary was also often employed to make a copy of the letter for the author before the letter was sent to the recipient. This seems to have been the practice of both the wealthy and the lower classes.³⁹ Harry Gamble writes, “Ancient writers often kept copies of their private letters even when no particular literary merit or topical importance was attached to them; and copies of instructional, administrative letters were all the more likely to be kept.”⁴⁰

It is likely then that Paul employed the secretary to not only write the document to be sent, but also to make personal copies for Paul to keep in his archives.

Time and Cost Required to Write a Letter

It is impossible to estimate how much time Paul spent in the preparation of one of his letters. Actual time developing notes, rough drafts and discussions with members of his missionary team involving the contents of his letters would certainly vary from letter to letter and would depend on the particular occasion and urgency of the letter.

The time required to write the final drafts of his letters, however, can be fairly easily estimated. A standard line in a letter was composed of

³⁹ See Tyrell and Purser, *Correspondence*, 1:59; Plutarch, *Eumenes*, 2.2-3; Alan R. Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 165.

⁴⁰ Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale, 1995), 101.

sixteen syllables (about 36 letters) and was called a *stichos*. This unit was standardized to allow secretaries to charge per line. While the cost of secretarial labor and materials would certainly vary from location to location, a conservative estimate of 25 denars per 10,000 lines of text can be used.⁴¹ A standard roll of papyrus (about 12 feet long) cost about four denars.⁴² Approximately 30 lines per page was typical for first century letter writing.⁴³ In the first century skilled labor was paid at a rate of one denarii per day, with unskilled labor being paid at a rate of one half a denarii per day.

With these numbers we can estimate the time and cost required for each of the Pauline letters.

| Letter | Lines⁴⁴ | Hours | Papyrus Cost⁴⁵ | Secretary Cost | Total Cost⁴⁶ |
|-----------------|---------------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Romans | 979 | 11.5 | 5.44 | 2.45 | 7.89 |
| 1 Corinthians | 908 | 10.7 | 5.04 | 2.27 | 7.31 |
| 2 Corinthians | 607 | 7.1 | 3.36 | 1.52 | 4.88 |
| Galatians | 311 | 3.6 | 1.72 | 0.78 | 2.5 |
| Ephesians | 331 | 3.9 | 1.84 | 0.83 | 2.67 |
| Philippians | 221 | 2.6 | 1.24 | 0.55 | 1.79 |
| Colossians | 215 | 2.5 | 1.2 | 0.54 | 1.74 |
| 1 Thessalonians | 207 | 2.4 | 1.16 | 0.52 | 1.68 |
| 2 Thessalonians | 111 | 1.3 | 0.6 | 0.28 | 0.88 |
| 1 Timothy | 238 | 2.8 | 1.32 | 0.6 | 1.92 |
| 2 Timothy | 182 | 2.1 | 1 | 0.46 | 1.46 |
| Titus | 100 | 1.2 | 0.56 | 0.25 | 0.81 |
| Philemon | 44 | 0.5 | 0.24 | 0.11 | 0.35 |

The longest letter written by Paul, Romans, would have then taken over a week's pay to compose the final draft alone. The shortest letter, Philemon, would have cost less than a half day's pay. Letter writing could clearly become an expensive endeavor, especially when we figure in the cost of multiple drafts and copies of each of the letters.

⁴¹ Richards, *Paul*, 167-169.

⁴² Millard, 165.

⁴³ Richards, *Paul*, 166.

⁴⁴ Early manuscripts vary in the number of lines for each Pauline letter. These estimates are taken from McRay, 276.

⁴⁵ Each of the cost figures in the chart are in denars.

⁴⁶ These numbers are an estimate for the final draft only. One would also need to consider the cost of rough drafts and copies of each letter, but as it is impossible to determine the number of drafts or copies Paul used, I have not included these numbers here.

Letter Delivery

Letter delivery was an important task that required trust on many levels. Demosthenes once questioned, “What wouldn’t a person be capable of doing, who would carry a letter and not deliver it forthwith and conscientiously?”⁴⁷

Paul’s letter delivery seems to have followed the regular patterns set forth for official letters in the Roman Empire. The process, as described by M. Luther Stirewalt, is as follows:

With regard to reception, administrative communications were directed to a chief officer, a body of people, a state or community, or authorized representatives. Official presentation, public reading, and oral reports constituted a protocol that completed the customary procedures for well-established logistics: preparation, delivery, reception.⁴⁸

In this process the letter carrier was likely more than a simple errand person. The carrier may have been the official reader of the letter. Most of Paul’s letters are directed towards Christian communities rather than individuals and are intended to be read aloud to the gathered congregation. The carrier may have been the person responsible for this reading. It is also likely that the reader was responsible for answering questions, expounding further on important points or even clarifying difficult passages. This seems to have been the preferred practice of the early church. Luke tells us of a similar situation when the Jerusalem Council issued a letter to the Antioch church concerning a controversy that had risen among the early believers. In addition to sending the letter, the council also sends two men to confirm the letter and answer questions concerning the contents. Luke writes:

So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul--men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.... The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.⁴⁹

It is likely that Paul’s letter carriers performed similar roles. In addition to carrying the letter, they also probably read and discussed the letter with the recipient.

⁴⁷ Demosthenes, *Oracles*, 34.29.

⁴⁸ M. Luther Stirewalt, Jr., *Paul, the Letter Writer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 6.

⁴⁹ Acts 15:25-32.

Conclusion

The New Testament is essentially a library of documents written in Koine Greek to the early church. The library of the New Testament is comprised of “books” from several literary genres. Almost half of these “books” are actually letters from written from the Apostle Paul to churches spread through out the Mediterranean region. While we may commonly conjure mental images of Paul sitting alone writing his letters, we are probably more correct in viewing the letter writing process as joint effort between Paul and several of his co-workers. Paul used a secretary who would have some input to the letters. Paul also occasionally used coauthors who also have input to the letters. Finally, Paul used letter carriers who would deliver, read and then discuss the letters with the recipients. These documents were then circulated, copied and collected into what we now know as the New Testament.

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