

How to Read the Bible

New Testament Letters

VIDEO NOTES

In the New Testament, there are 21 letters written by early Christian leaders to communities of Jesus' followers in the ancient Roman world. A wise reading of these letters involves learning about their historical and literary context. That's what our two videos on How to Read the New Testament Letters are all about!

In these video notes, we'll explore in depth the different layers of historical and literary context within these letters, so that we can better understand the wisdom they still have to offer.

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Introduction

The New Testament has a large collection of ancient letters from the circle of the apostles:

- Paul: 13 letters to 7 church communities
- Peter: 1 & 2 Peter
- John: 1, 2, 3, John
- Jacob (“James”)
- Jude
- To the Hebrews

The letters from the apostles found in the Bible were not written as timeless, abstract essays on theology and ethics. They are *real letters* with real audiences, written for particular purposes and in response to specific situations. For a robust understanding of these texts, and to make sure that we don’t take their words out of context, we need to develop a reading skill-set that takes all this into consideration.

So how do we essentially read someone else’s mail? It requires knowledge of the sender, receiver, the situational context of the relationship, and the cultural and language context in which these people live. Without considering these factors, we are bound to misunderstand the meaning of the writers and take their words out of context.

The Modern Inclination to Overlook Context

The special attention needed to read the letters is hard for modern Bible readers to remember for lots of reasons. Here are just a few:

- The rest of the Bible feels challenging to read, and the New Testament letters can appear “easier” to read in comparison to the Old Testament prophets or laws.
- The letters are written from an “I” to a “you” audience, which feels immediately relevant to the reader. This makes the letters feel like “God’s word to me” in a way that other parts of the Bible don’t.
- The New Testament letters are about Jesus, who he is, why he matters, and how I should live as his follower. That seems to directly address me and my place in the biblical storyline. So, we often assume that we can simply pick the New Testament letters and plop them into the life of a local 21st century church where they can speak to us “directly”.
- There are lots of “sound-byte” and “tweetable” Christian truths that seem to require no knowledge of context. Here’s a few examples:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

ROMANS 6:23

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

EPHESIAN 2:8-9

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

1 JOHN 4:7

Problematic Passages for Direct Application

Some Christians may carry the sentiment “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.” But, there are many passages that become immediately problematic for those who read the New Testament letters as “God’s word directly to me.” Here’s just a few examples:

SCRIPTURE	QUESTIONS RAISED
<i>Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses. (1 TIMOTHY 5:23)</i>	Is wine the cure for stomach illnesses?
<i>Greet one another with a kiss of love. (1 PETER 5:14)</i> <i>Greek one another with a holy kiss. (ROMANS 16:16)</i>	Should we be kissing one another to have a proper greeting?
<i>From now on those who have wives should live as if they have none... (1 CORINTHIANS 7:29)</i>	What about Genesis 2:23-24 where God blesses marriage as a sacred gift, or other passages where Paul affirms or praises marriage (like Ephesians 5)?
<i>Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him... (1 CORINTHIANS 11:14)</i>	What about the Nazarites in Numbers 6? There God commands men to never cut their hair because it represents a sacred dedication to God, like Samson. And what about the fact that we’re told in Acts 18:18 that Paul had grown out his hair in a Nazirite vow!
<i>Women should remain silent in the churches.</i> <i>They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says... (1 CORINTHIANS 14:34)</i> <i>But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. (1 CORINTHIANS 11:5)</i>	What about where Paul clearly assumes and approves of women leading a house church in praying and prophesying? And what about Priscilla, who was clearly a teacher in the churches of Corinth and Rome. And what about the women “speaking” in church in 1 Corinthians 11?
<i>Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. (COLOSSIANS 3:22)</i>	What about Galatians 3:28 and Philemon (who lives in Colosse!) where Paul says that slave and free are meaningless categories in Christ and that Christians are to recognize that slaves are actually siblings, not their slaves?

Some Christian traditions have adopted the “pick and choose” method when it comes to “applying” the Bible, especially the epistles. And this raises the question...

“How is a letter which Paul directed to specific churches in specific situations at particular times the word of God for the church at large in all times?”

KRISTER STENDAHL, PAUL AMONG THE JEWS AND GENTILES,
(PHILADELPHIA:FORTRESS, 1963): 6.

The New Testament was “not written in the first instance for residents of the United States at the end of the twentieth century. When we read Paul’s letters to his churches, we are reading the mail of people who have been dead for nineteen hundred years...Only historical ignorance or cultural chauvinism could lead us to suppose that no interpretive ‘translation’ is necessary for us to understand these texts...But if the New Testament’s teachings are so integrally embedded in the social and symbolic world of the first-century, how do they speak...to us or for us?”

RICHARD B. HAYS, *THE MORAL VISION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: A CONTEMPORARY INTRODUCTION TO NEW TESTAMENT ETHICS* (HARPER:SAN FRANCISCO, 1996), 6.

“Fundamentalists, charismatics, social activists, feminists, evangelicals, traditionalists, liberationists—all of us, in fact—go to the texts of the Bible and return with trophies that are replicas of our own theological image. It is no easy task genuinely to listen to the voice of Scripture rather than merely to hear the sound of our own echoes.”

THOMAS G. LONG, *PREACHING AND THE LITERARY FORMS OF THE BIBLE* (PHILADELPHIA: FORTRESS, 1989): 28

A Way Forward: Reading the New Testament Letters in Context

Reading the New Testament letters requires sensitivity to a number of contexts. We’re going to focus on four:

1. The Narrative Context

Where do the New Testament letters fit within the narrative context of the larger biblical story? Can a better understanding of that context help us in ‘translating’ their message into our own day?

2. The Cultural Context

The letters were written within a diverse cultural context of the cities to which they were addressed. In particular, we should pay attention to:

- **Jewish Culture:** The early messianic Jesus movement was Jewish in culture and language but expanded into the non-Jewish world: James, John, Peter, and Paul all represent unique cultural expressions of early Christianity.
- **Greco-Roman Culture:** The larger Greco-Roman culture which operated according to the values of *honor and shame, hierarchy and patriarchy, patronage and status, purity and pollution*

3. The Situational Context

What is the relationship of the author and audience? The situational context of the house-church(es) that provides the backstory of the letter's occasion, purpose, and motivation which therefore informs the interpretation of the letter's content.

4. The Literary Context

The literary context of the entire letter as a unified act of ancient epistolary communication. The letters must be read in light of the conventions and realities of ancient letter writing, and every single part of a letter must be understood in light of its function within the developing argument.

The Narrative Context

Within the storyline of the Hebrew Bible, three important themes are developed that set the context for the international spread of the Jesus movement and the movement of the letters.

1. The Image of God
2. The Family of Abraham
3. The Messiah

Theme 1: The Image of God

In Genesis 1, God appoints humanity as the divine image who will rule the world in partnership.

*Then God said,
"Let Us make human in Our image,
according to Our likeness;
and let them rule over the fish of the sea
and over the birds of the sky
and over the cattle
and over all the earth,
and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."*

*And God created human in His own image,
in the image of God He created him;
male and female He created them.*

GENESIS 1:26-27

In Genesis 3, humanity fails at this task and is exiled from the royal-temple-garden. This creates the need for a new human, a true image of God who can rule as God's partner over all creation.

Theme 2: The Family of Abraham Bringing Blessing to the Nations

The story continues as we follow the life of Abraham and the nation of Israel. God promises to bless the family of Abraham and, through them, bless all nations.

	<p>Now the Lord said to Abram:</p>
A	Go forth from your country,
B	<u>and from your relatives</u>
B'	<u>and from your father's house,</u>
A'	to the land which I will show you;
A	and I will make you a great nation,
B	and I will bless you,
A'	and make your name great ;
B'	and so you shall be a blessing ;
A	and I will bless those who bless you,
A'	and the one who curses you I will curse .
B	and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed ."
	GENESIS 12:1-3
	<p>Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty (El Shaddai); Walk before Me, and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly." Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, And you will be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called <u>Abram</u>, But your name shall be <u>Abraham</u>; For I will make you the father of a multitude of nations. "I have made you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you,</p>
	GENESIS 17:1-6

The blessing of Abraham spread to all nations through a "kingdom of priests". This is best represented by the exalted "messianic servant" who sends out his "servants" to announce the reign of God.

*'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians,
and how I bore you on eagles' wings,
and brought you to Myself.
And now,
if you will listen-listen to my voice and keep My covenant,
then you shall be My own special possession among all the peoples,
for all the land is Mine,
so you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'*

EXODUS 19:4-6

Fast forward to when Israel becomes a nation. God says that through the line of King David, a new human will come who will assume the role as the true image of God.

*"When your days are fulfilled that you must go to be with your fathers, that **I will raise up one of your seed after you**, who will be of your sons; **and I will establish his kingdom. "He shall build for Me a house, and I will establish his throne forever. "I will be his father and he shall be My son**; and I will not take My lovingkindness away from him, as I took it from him who was before you. **"But I will settle him in My house and in My kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever."***

2 SAMUEL 7, 1 CHRONICLES 17:11-14

Israel's prophets speak to this promise. Here are several passages from Isaiah, looking forward to this new human impacting the nations.

Then in that day

The nations will resort to the root of Jesse,
*Who will stand as **a signal for the peoples;***
And His resting place will be glorious.

ISAIAH 11:10

*He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;*

**I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."**
*Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and its Holy One,
To the despised One,
To the One abhorred by the nation,
To the Servant of rulers,
"Kings will see and arise,
Princes will also bow down,
Because of the Lord who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You."*

ISAIAH 49:6-7

*"And, because of what they have planned and done, **I am about to come and gather the people of all nations and languages, and they will come and see my glory. I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of the remnant to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians... to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. And they will bring all your people, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the Lord—on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels,"** says the Lord. "They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the Lord in ceremonially clean vessels. **And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites,"** says the Lord. "As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the Lord, "so will your name and descendants endure.*

ISAIAH 66:18-22

Theme 3: The Messianic Servant

Through this Messianic Servant the people become the new covenant Israel. The people of the new covenant are marked by hearts transformed by God's new-creation Spirit so that they can love God and neighbor.

- **Deuteronomy 30:1-6:** Circumcision of the heart
- **Jeremiah 31:31-34:** Torah written on the heart, everyone knows Yahweh
- **Ezekiel 36:22-30:** Yahweh's Spirit creates new humans who love and listen to God

Jesus: True Human Image, Messianic Servant Over the Nations

When we arrive at the Gospels, the three themes emerging from the Hebrew Scripture converge in the life of Jesus. Jesus presented himself as the royal-priestly servant who is inaugurating the Kingdom of God and creating the New Covenant Israel spoken of in the Torah and Prophets. The following verses show the intentional connections to the previous story, and how Jesus and his followers continue the plotline.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Turn around and trust the good news!"

MARK 1:14-15

The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

"You have said so," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

MATTHEW 26:63-64

*For even the Son of Man did not come **to be served, but to be a servant, and to give his life as a ransom for many.***

MARK 10:45

*In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "**This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.**"*

LUKE 22:20, SEE ALSO MATTHEW 26:26-28

Jesus deputized his disciples as “apostles” who would represent him to Israel and the nations. The word “Apostle” = Greek ἀπόστολος / Aramaic נְחִיָּא “one who is sent as a representative”.

TO ISRAEL FIRST...	THEN TO THE NATIONS...
<p><i>Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness... These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “Do not go in the way of the nations, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Anyone who welcomes you [apostles] welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">MATTHEW 10:1, 5-7, 40</p>	<p><i>Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">MATTHEW 28:18-20</p> <p><i>Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">LUKE 24:45-49</p>

In John’s Gospel, Jesus promises the Spirit so that the apostles can continue his own mission in the world.

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

JOHN 14:26

[‘you all’ = the apostles in reference to their role as authorized tradents of Jesus’ message]

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.

JOHN 16:13-14

Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.

JOHN 20:21-22

The Apostles Continue the Story

Let's look at the summary of the biblical story up to this point:

- Creation and Image of God
- Rebellion, the fallout, and Babylon
- God's mission through Israel
- Israel's exile and the hope for God's kingdom
- Jesus: the true royal-priestly image and the Kingdom for Israel
- **Jesus' kingdom for the nations through the apostles**
- Consummation of the kingdom in new creation

The apostles play a crucial role in the unified story of the Bible. They traveled around the ancient mediterranean world in the early decades of the Jesus movement (mid-30s and 40s A.D.), announcing that Jesus was the exalted king of the cosmos, calling all nations to believing loyalty.

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and **you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.***
And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

ACTS 1:8-9

They just experienced a vision of Daniel 7: The crucified and risen one being exalted to the high place of cosmic rule over the nations.

*Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning **His Son**,
who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh,
who was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness,*

Jesus Christ our Lord,
*through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the **believing loyalty among all the nations** for His name's sake, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ*

ROMANS 1:1-6

See also Romans 15:14-33 and the "offering of the nations" to God

*And what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, **when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.***

EPHESIANS 1:19-21

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, **and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**

HEBREWS 12:2

You are saved “by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, **who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.**”

1 PETER 3:21B-22

Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, [Paul and Silas] came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Messiah had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah.” And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.

But some Jewish men, filled with zeal, and taking along some wicked men from the marketplace, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting,

“These men who have **turned the world order upside-down** have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, **saying that there is another king, Jesus.**”

ACTS 17:1-7

As the apostles traveled around announcing that Jesus is the real king of the world, their oral teachings eventually took shape as writings, and they were viewed as an expression of Jesus’ authority over his New Covenant people, alongside the Scriptures of Israel.

And we also thank God continually because, when you received **the word of God**, which you **heard from us**, you accepted it **not as a human word, but as it actually is, a word of God**, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

1 THESSALONIANS 2:13

I charge you before the Lord to **have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.**

1 THESSALONIANS 5:27

So then, brothers and sisters, **stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by our spoken word or by letter.**

2 THESSALONIANS 2:15

*I want you to recall **the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles...** Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our **dear brother Paul** also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. **His letters** contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do **the other Scriptures**, to their own destruction.*

2 PETER 3:2, 15-16

These teachings involved a call to live as the new covenant family of Abraham, new kinds of humans, who embody the ethical vision of Jesus' kingdom.

When you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old humanity, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new humanity, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

EPHESIANS 4:21-24

The Bottom Line:

The apostles' letters represent the announcement and teaching of king Jesus given to specific local house-churches living in the Greek and Roman worlds.

We inhabit the same spot in the biblical story as the original recipients, but we live in a vastly different cultural setting. This means we must provide cross-cultural translation of the apostles' teaching into our own multi-cultural contexts.

The Cultural Context

The Jesus movement moved from Jerusalem out into the world first as a messianic Jewish movement through networks of diaspora synagogues, and then into the wider non-Jewish world of Greco-Roman culture. This culture was vastly different from our own in a number of ways. The following section of notes will take a look at the unique cultural blend between *messianic diaspora Judaism* and Greek/Roman culture. This context stamped every single part of the language, theology, and cultural assumptions at work in these letters.

The Roman Empire

The NT letters were all written to house churches spread throughout the Eastern end of the Mediterranean, the heartland of the Roman empire in the mid-1st century A.D. So what do we need to know about the Roman empire?

The Roman empire had been ruling over the Mediterranean world for nearly 80 years by 50 A.D. At the top was the emperor who viewed himself a divine-human whose rule brought good news and salvation to the world. Roman law, values, gods, roads, and coins spread the ‘good news’ of Augustus through the empire.

‘The emperor cult’ spreading throughout the first century was cultic and religious devotion to the Roman emperor as an incarnation of the divine power of Rome. The emperor was not only the king, but the “high priest” (*pontifex maximus*). Temples spread through the empire where people would offer sacrifices and offerings to the “god-Augustus” (*divi Augusti*). Statues of the emperor were placed everywhere, prayers were said for him and in his name at public events and festivals. The emperor was given titles such as “savior” (Grk. *soter*), whose rule brought “good news” (Grk. *euangelion*) and “peace” (Grk. *eirene*).

The Greek and Roman empires relate to each other in a similar way that England and America do today. Greece/England was the reigning world empire of a previous generation, and Rome/America inherited the imperial territory, ruling ideology, and economic dominance from their forebears but also gave it all their own unique cultural stamp.

“But there was a dark side to Rome’s ‘peace’ that cannot be forgotten... The Romans established and maintained their empire through conquest, subjugation, and intimidation. It was, in other words, peace through war, and security via domination. The Romans invaded and enslaved; they moved the conquered in and out; they formed new colonies and refounded old cities as their own colonies. They imposed taxes and tributes to maintain the empire...and its peace among the subjugated. And they had a deterrent to make sure that those who might threaten the peace understood the consequences: crucifixion.”

MICHAEL GORMAN, APOSTLE OF THE CRUCIFIED LORD, 19.

Honor and Shame in the Greco-Roman World

Honor comes from the public affirmation of a person’s worth, validated by family, peers, and community members. Social status is indicated by “esteem/reputation” which comes from the Greek word *dokeo* (δοκεω) “to be recognized.” In fact, this verb is the root of the Greek noun *doxa* (δοξα) often translated as “glory,” but which is better rendered as “honor.” Honor is awarded on the basis of the person’s ability to embody the virtues and traits that the society values.

- **Some attributes are not earned:** birth into a family of wealth or status; birth into a particular ethnos (Roman vs. Barbarian)
- **Other attributes can be earned:** piety (worship of the gods), courage, reliability
- **Honor differs according to class and sex:** a free man's honor differs from a free woman, in contrast to a male or female slave

Implications of the Greco-Roman Standards for Honor

- In a culture where an individual's honor is tied to the group's honor, there is strong incentive to promote conformity to the group's core values. Violations of the group's code of honor are dealt with severely: adultery, cowardice, theft.
- In this kind of culture, persuasion often takes the form of showing how certain behaviors result in honor, while others in dishonor and shame. Praising people and criticizing others is a regular practice.
- In honor cultures, there is a carefully defined group of elites, who define the group's values and practices, and who enforce the boundary lines of the community through honor and shame.

“Simply defined, honor and shame refer to the ongoing attribution or loss of esteem by one’s peers, family, social-class, city, and so on. In Roman society this respect was based primarily on such things as wealth, education, rhetorical skill, family pedigree, and political connections. These were the culture’s ‘status-indicators.’ In this context, ‘self-esteem’ would be conceived of as a ridiculous oxymoron, the only esteem one has is bestowed by the self but by the group... In this environment, peer pressure is not negative or something to avoid, but is viewed as appropriate and welcome.”

MICHAEL GORMAN, APOSTLE OF THE CRUCIFIED LORD:
A THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION TO PAUL AND HIS LETTERS, 13.

Multicultural Dynamics of Honor and Shame

The Roman empire was an ancient melting pot: Greek, Roman, and Jewish honor codes all differed and overlapped in various ways.

- **Jews:** Monotheism and allegiance to the one God of Israel, expressed through Torah observance of kosher laws, circumcision, and Sabbath.
- **Romans:** piety for the traditional Roman deities.
- Jews thought Romans acted dishonorably by giving reverence to idols and not worshipping the one God.

Honor and Shame in the New Testament

The early Christians were a persecuted religious minority whose founding figure was a degraded and shamefully executed criminal of the Roman state. What we see in the New Testament letters is a reframing of the meaning of Jesus' death as an act of courage and self-giving generosity, therefore showing it honorable. Notice the reference to 'shame' in Romans 5:

*"Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and **hope does not put us to shame**, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."*

ROMANS 5:3-5

Early Christians were viewed as social deviants and were shunned, shamed, and dishonored. 1 Peter is a full reframe of this shame in terms of inverted honor. You'll find other texts in the New Testament that try to lower the importance of popular standards of honor and elevate the evaluation of an alternative set of standards (God, Jesus, the apostles, etc.).

Understanding this dynamic helps us understand the New Testament letters in multiple ways (from DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 99-10).

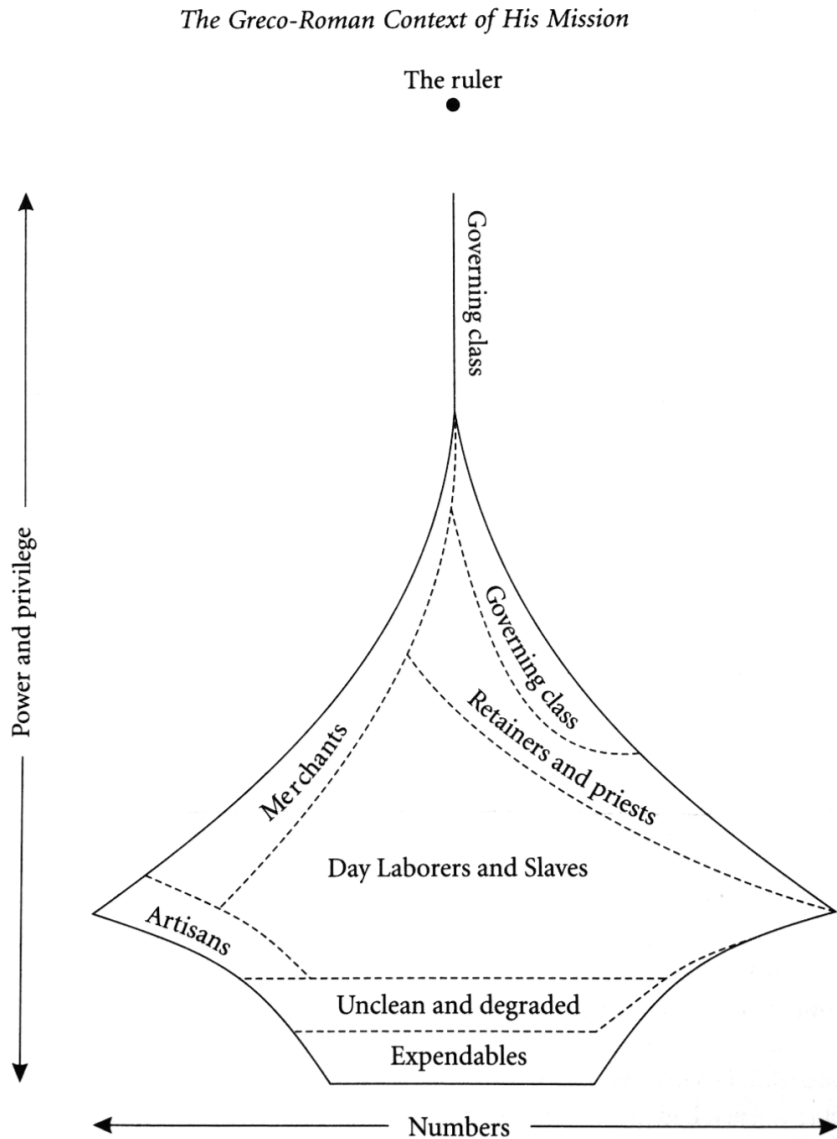
- It helps us see the persuasive power of the New Testament letters for their original audiences, who were minority communities struggling to maintain self-respect and faithfulness despite the public shame or humiliation they faced.
- It helps us identify the social agenda of the New Testament letters as they seek to form counter-cultures that are guided by an alternative value set. Such contrast-communities require a reframing of core values and codes of honor.

Hierarchy and Patriarchy

The honor-status hierarchy is an alpha-male centered social structure. From the Roman emperor on down to the family household, Greco-Roman culture was vertically structured around a lone male freedman who gained honor as a benefactor to those underneath him. Visualize below.

Figure: The hierarchical structure of societies such as that of Paul's time

Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, 284



"In the [Roman] hierarchical arrangement, power was concentrated at the top... At the pinnacle was the emperor. Beneath him were the senators, then the equestrians, a class of high-ranking military and political figures, then the decurions, aristocrats with land and other forms of wealth but only local political power. Supporting this governing class was a network of 'retainers,' that is, political and religious officials (priests, government functionaries) who kept the machinery of power running and attended to the needs of the elite... This entire group comprised about 3 percent of the population. Further down the 'tower' were those of some means but little or no political power, like merchants and successful artisans. They were not like what Westerners call "middle-class," though they did exist in the middle. They constituted anywhere from 5-15 percent of the populace... The remaining 85 percent consisted of working lower class slaves and free persons including artisans, craftsmen, merchants, and below them the working poor and day laborers. At the very bottom were the impure and the expendables, essentially those without any status, wealth, or skills to contribute value to those above them: widows, orphans, prisoners, beggars, or those with disabilities. You can see from this that for the vast majority of the population, the main priority was simply survival."

MICHAEL GORMAN, APOSTLE OF THE CRUCIFIED LORD:
A THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION TO PAUL AND HIS LETTERS, 13-14.

Patriarchy and Family Structure

Families were arranged in extended family household structures that were models of the empire itself: at the top was a patriarch who had legal and economic ownership of all who lived in his estate:

- The wife / Children / Extended family / Slaves
- The alpha-male had *patria potestas*, absolute power and legal authority over anyone in his household.
- Kinship groups referred to each other as siblings, and were organized around a patriarch.

"Of household management we have seen that there are three parts - one is the rule of a master over slaves, which has been discussed already, another of a father, and the third of a husband. A husband and father, we saw, rules over wife and children, both free, but the rule differs; the rule over his children being royal, and the ruler over his wife is based on natural constitution. For although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female, just as the elder and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature."

ARISTOTLE, POLITICS, 1:12

There was incentive for patriarchs to be generous patrons, who became benefactors to everyone of a lower status in exchange for loyalty and submission. For example:

- Gifts were given by the patriarch to those deemed worthy of benefaction, such that they could provide 'return' to the giver.
- Public buildings, infrastructure, local festivals, etc. were all sponsored by wealthy benefactors in an effort to gain status and allegiance among their subordinates.

Notes on Slavery

The institution of slavery was indispensable for the economy and military power of the Roman empire. Scholar Walter Scheidel notes:

"In urban areas a significant percentage of all inhabitants were owned by another. In the 1st century, between 25-40% of the almost one million inhabitants were slaves."

WALTER SCHEIDEL. 2005. 'HUMAN MOBILITY IN ROMAN ITALY, II: THE SLAVE POPULATION', JOURNAL OF ROMAN STUDIES 95: 64-79

Slaves were by nature in a state of public dishonor, though one could have high social rank because of their household patriarch. The slave's children were enslaved as well. The slave trade was fed by prisoners of war, ethnic enslavement, and debt slavery. Most slaves were sexually abused.

Manumission/redemption of slaves did happen and was the hope of almost every slave. A freed slave gained some honor, but being a freedman still came with a stigma and lower social rank.

Patriarchy in the New Testament Letters

Let's take a look at some Bible passages addressing household codes in light of the cultural context of patriarchy.

¹⁸Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. ²²Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

COLOSSIANS 3:18-25

²¹...submitting to one another out of reverence for the Messiah,

²²Wives, to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as the Messiah is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to the Messiah, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as the Messiah loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Messiah does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." ³²This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Messiah and the church. ³³However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

^{6:1}Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." ⁴Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

⁵Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Messiah, ⁶not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Messiah, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or is free.

⁹Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

LONG FORM: EPHESIANS 5:21-6:9

At first glance, the apostles can be viewed as upholding the patriarchal status quo when we ignore the cultural background against which they operate. When viewed in comparison to their cultural neighbors, it's clear that the good news about Jesus undermined patriarchy by insisting that all people were of equal status in the Messiah's family. This opened up new cultural possibilities for women and slaves in the early Christian communities. Here's just one example of the cultural view of women at the time:

"The woman... is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be obedient, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for God has given authority to the man."

JOSEPHUS, AGAINST APION 2:24

The household codes of Paul and Peter can feel as if they are mandating a patriarchal ideal. In reality, they are undermining its basis with the upside-down value system of the Gospel. The following quotes provide further insight to this point.

“This instruction [in Ephesians 5] to the husband/patriarch is completely at odds with contemporary household codes... First, husbands are commanded to “love” their wives, a command that appears in no other contemporary household code... which focus on the proper ordering of household units by the patriarch for his own comfort and ease. Second, husbands are not to dominate their subordinate wives, but their love is to imitate the self-sacrificial love of Christ. Paul directly confronts the system of domination in the wider culture... where the great authority that is invested in patriarchs over their entire households was often exercised with conniving manipulation. Husbands are to resist the temptation to operate according to the Old Humanity, and not to take advantage of their position as the head, but rather to use the power of their position for the sake of their wives.”

GOMBIS, “THE RADICALLY NEW HUMANITY,” 327.

“The reminder of the links between discussion of the household and discussion of the state in the Greco-Roman world, whereby the household was viewed as the foundation of the state, is extremely significant for interpretation of the early Christian use of household codes. It reveals that proper household management was generally regarded as a matter of crucial social and political concern and that any upsetting of the traditional hierarchical order of the household could be considered a potential threat to the order of society as a whole... In Greco-Roman culture, wives, children, and slaves were expected to accept the religion of the male head of the household (called the “paterfamilias”), and so religious groups that attracted women and slaves were particularly seen as potentially subversive of societal stability. Writers in Greco-Roman society singled out the cults of Dionysus and Isis, which attracted women devotees, and also Judaism, since Jewish slaves rejected the worship of their Roman masters’ gods... As Christianity spread in the Roman world and women and slaves converted to this new religion, it too became the object of similar suspicion and criticism. Social tensions between Christians and the rest of society, as well as tensions within the early Christian movement, need... to be given their due in any account of the emergence of Christian household codes. It may well have been external factors, the need to respond to accusations from outsiders and to set standards in line with common notions of propriety, as much as internal ones, the need to respond to enthusiastic demands for freedom on the part of believers, that led Christians to take up the household code.”

ANDREW T. LINCOLN, EPHESIANS, VOL. 42, WORD BIBLICAL COMMENTARY, 358.

Patronage and Honor

When reading letters like 1 or 2 Corinthians, it is important to know the unique culture of patron-

age and honor. For example when Paul was in Corinth, he was in a city obsessed with honor and status. By becoming patrons of famous and eloquent teachers, a community could gain status in the public eye. Paul, however, worked as a craftsman (leather worker), so that he could plant and teach and minister free of charge. This was viewed as an insult to the Corinthians as it robbed them of a chance to increase their honor. Keep in mind this cultural insight as you look at the following passages from 1 and 2 Corinthians:

¹¹If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ¹²If others have **this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?**

But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.

¹³Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? ¹⁴In the same way, the Lord has commanded that **those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.**

¹⁵**But I have not used any of these rights...**

What then is my reward? Just this: that **in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights** as a preacher of the gospel.

1 CORINTHIANS 9:11-15

⁵I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." ⁶I may indeed be untrained as a speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way. ⁷**Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge?** ⁸I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. ⁹And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. **I have kept myself from being a burden to you** in any way, and will continue to do so.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:5-9

¹¹I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even though I am nothing. ¹²I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles. ¹³**How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!**

2 CORINTHIANS 12:11-13

Purity and Pollution

As you read, you may notice the New Testament authors use words like holy, clean, pure, undefiled, unblemished, sanctified, saints, unholy, impure, defiled, profane, common. What did the authors intend to communicate when they used those words?

In that culture, purity and impurity have to do with items being in the "proper place." Food in the kitchen and dining room, but not in the bathroom. Food does not belong on the floor, but on the plate. Soil and grime belong outside the house, but not on the living room floor. Trash

belongs in a hidden can, but not on display in your bedroom. Items that are “out of place” are “polluting” or “defiling” that space.

The Situational Context

The **situational context** of the house-church(es) provides the backstory of the letter’s occasion, purpose, and motivation. Nearly every one of the NT letters was prompted by an occasion, circumstance, or series of events in the author and audience’s shared past. This context should inform our interpretation of every part of the letter.

Here’s a helpful analogy. If you’ve ever overheard another person talking on the phone, you probably tried to listen and guess (1) who they’re talking to and (2) what they are talking about and why. Reading the New Testament letters is like listening in on the apostle’s correspondence with actual house churches, full of people with whom they have a prehistory of relationship. The following section will demonstrate reading skills that will tune readers into the situational context.

Skill 1: Read Letters as a Whole

The baseline skill in reading the epistles is to read them as a unified whole. While reading, look for any explicit statements about the purpose of the letter or the situation that motivated the author to write the letter. Take a look at the following emphasis’ in Galatians, Philippians, 1 Peter, and 1 Corinthians:

Galatians

1:6: I am amazed that **you are so quickly deserting Him who called you** by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel*;

2:1-3: Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. But **not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.**

2:11-14: But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing **the circumcision** party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, **“If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”**

3:26-29: For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

5:2: Behold I, Paul, say to you that **if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.**

**The "different Gospel" comes from Messianic Jewish missionaries who have come to the churches telling them they cannot be part of the family of the Messiah or the kingdom of God unless they are circumcised and become converts to the Jewish nations.*

Philippians

1:3-5: I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, **in view of your participation in the gospel** from the first day until now.

4:14-18: Yet **it was good of you to share in my troubles.** Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. **I have received full payment and have more than enough.** I am amply supplied, **now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent.** They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

1 Peter

1:6-7: In all this you greatly rejoice, **though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.** These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

4:12-16: Dear friends, do not be surprised at **the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you,** as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. **If you are insulted because of the name of Christ,** you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. **If you suffer,** it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

5:8-9: Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, **because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.**

1 Corinthians

1:10-17: I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For **it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you**, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. Well, I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else. For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel...

5:1: It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.

7:1: Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

8:1: Now about food sacrificed to idols...

12:1: Now concerning the things of spirit...

13: The "love" chapter occurs in a complex discussion about manifestations of the Spirit that were causing disruptions in the weekly house church gathering

Skill 2: Mirror Reading

An important contribution to this discussion was by two scholars John Barclay and Nijay Gupta, who honed a method called "mirror reading" for using information in the New Testament letters to reconstruct the situation out of and into which the apostle is speaking. The metaphor goes like this: we have only the reflection, not the actual situation that the reflection represents. We only get one angle on the objects in the mirror, so we need to "gap fill."

"Mirror-reading a letter involves, of course, looking at an 'image' (part of a conversation) and trying to discern the original 'object' (the original discussion or context). From a letter of Paul, for instance, we can learn some details about the situation against which he might be reacting.... But not all the details are clear, so gap-filling is required to understand why Paul writes the things he does in the letter."

NIJAY GUPTA, "MIRROR-READING MORAL ISSUES IN PAUL'S LETTERS,"
IN JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, VOL. 34 (2012), PP. 361-381.

John Barclay and Nijay Gupta proposed a series of criteria that are helpful when we hypothesize a situation that the apostle is speaking into.

5 Things to Pay Attention To in Mirror Reading

1. **The type of statement**

- **Assertion:** likely imply that someone is practicing or teaching the opposite
- **Denial:** implies that someone has made a false claim about the author
- **Command:** implies that people are not doing what is described
- **Prohibition:** implies that people are doing what is mentioned

2. **Tone:** Does he issue the above statements with emphasis or urgency?

3. **Frequency:** Does Paul repeat this theme or idea often enough to show that he's responding to an issue?

4. **Consistency:** We should assume that each letter addresses one core problem, argument, or person/group, unless it is explicit that diverse issues are being addressed.

- **Example:** In 1 Corinthians, Paul explicitly shifts topics and groups.
- **Example:** In 1 Thessalonians, there are a variety of problems addressed, but they could all be explained as manifestations of one core issue: over-zealous end-time fanaticism.

5. **Historical Plausibility:** Do we have evidence that the reconstructed group or ideas existed at the time?

Applying Narrative, Cultural, and Situational Context to Romans

Let's look at an example of how the first three contexts work in Paul's letter to the Romans.

1. **Biblical Narrative Context**

- **Romans 1:2-6:** Paul is an emissary of the risen Jesus, who has been exalted as the Messiah of Israel and the Lord of the nations. So his job is to summon the nations to belief in and loyalty to Jesus.

- **Romans 8:1-39:** Followers of Jesus are the new temple indwelt by the Spirit of the Messiah who marks us as adopted children of God. As such, we inhabit the current age as those who groan along with creation, suffering death and decay, but not overcome by it. Rather, we anticipate the liberation of creation when we are resurrected to become the cosmic rulers of the new creation alongside the Messiah.
- **Romans 15:16:** Paul is enacting the script from the Torah and Prophets, especially Isaiah, to announce Yahweh's rule to the nations and bring in the nations as an offering.

2. Cultural Context

- Rome is the capital city of the whole empire, and as such is saturated with royal-religious propaganda about the superiority of Rome and the divine authority of the emperor.
- Jewish resistance against Rome is growing by the mid-50s A.D., we are within 20yrs of the Jewish war against Rome that will result in Jerusalem's destruction. The anti-Jewish sentiments in Rome would have been noticeable and difficult.

3. Situational Context

Chapter 16 gives us an enormous amount of insight into the demographic realities of the churches in Rome. Take note of all the names.

<p>1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea;</p> <p>2 that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.</p>
<p>3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,</p> <p>4 who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; 5 also greet the church that is in their house.</p>
<p>Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first fruits to Christ from Asia.</p>
<p>6 Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.</p>
<p>7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.</p>

8 Greet Ampliatius , my beloved in the Lord.
9 Greet Urbanus , our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys my beloved.
10 Greet Apelles , the approved in Christ.
Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus .
11 Greet Herodion , my kinsman.
Greet those of the household of Narcissus , who are in the Lord.
12 Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa , workers in the Lord.
Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord.
13 Greet Rufus , a choice one in the Lord, also his mother and mine.
14 Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them.
15 Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas , and all the saints who are with them.
16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.
17 Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. 18 For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting. 19 For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.
20 The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.
The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.
21 Timothy my fellow worker greets you, also Lucius and Jason and Sosipater , my kinsmen.
22 I, Tertius , who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord.
23 Gaius , host to me and to the whole church, greets you.
Erastus , the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus , the brother.
24 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

Let's take a look at what significance can be drawn from Paul's parting note found in Romans 16.

Phoebe: Letter Bearer

Who is Phoebe? Abraham Malherbe notes "the forthrightness of Paul's commendation [of Phoebe] is striking. It has been frequently noted that this formula of recommendation implies that Phoebe was in fact the bearer of the letter to the Romans. The likelihood of this assertion is sustained and illustrated by Pseudo-Demetrius's example of a typical letter of recommendation:

"The one who is conveying this letter to you, has been tested by us and is loved on account of his trustworthiness. You will do well if you deem him worthy of approval both for my sake and his, and indeed for your own. For you will not be sorry if you entrust to him, in any manner you wish, either confidential words or matters. Indeed, you will also praise him to others when you notice how useful he can be in everything."

ABRAHAM MALHERBE, ANCIENT EPISTOLARY THEORISTS, 30-31

House Churches

From the text, we can gather there were a half dozen house churches of 20-30 people each in Rome. This means there were a couple hundred Christians in Rome, all meeting in different household groups. Paul names a few.

- Priscilla and Aquilas (16:5, “of their house”)
- Aristobulus (16:10 “those who are of...”)
- Narcissus (16:11, “those who are of...”)
- Asyncritus and company (16:14, “and those with them”)
- Philologus, Julia (16:15, “and those with them”)

Ethnic Diversity

We can also derive that there were diverse ethnic and socio-economic groups through the use of Jewish, Latin, and Greek names.

- Jewish names: Mary, Andronicus, Junia, Aquila, Prisca, Herodian, Rufus and his mother
- Latin names: Ampliatus, Julia, Urbanus
- Greek names: the rest

Divisions and Schism

From 16:17, we can gather there were divisions and schism within the Church. What’s behind this? This can be traced back to Claudius’ expulsion of Jews and Jewish-Christians from Rome in 49 A.D. This is mentioned in Acts 18:

*After these things [Paul] left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, **having recently come from Italy** with his wife Priscilla, **because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome**. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.*

ACTS 18:1-3

The expulsion of the Jews in Rome was also mentioned by a Roman historian Orosius:

“Suetonius [an earlier Roman historian] said, ‘Claudius expelled from Rome the Jews constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus.’ It cannot be determined whether he ordered only the Jews agitating against Christ to be restrained and suppressed, or whether he also wanted to expel Christians as being men of a related faith.”

OROSIUS, HIST. 7:6, 15-16

Robert Jewett brings clarity to why this historical fact brought about division within the Roman church:

“There is also solid evidence that conflicts within Rome’s synagogues had repeatedly come to the attention of the Roman authorities, in 41 and 49 c.e. ... related to Christian agitation... that led to the expulsion of Jewish and Jewish Christian leaders... With the banning of Jewish and Jewish Christian leaders in 49, a dramatic development of house and tenement churches ensued. This explains why the majority of converts were Gentiles by the time of Paul’s letter, less than a decade after these events. It explains how Paul could have become acquainted with so many Roman church leaders mentioned in chap. 16, and also why he urges that they be greeted and welcomed by all of the Roman congregations. After the Edict of Claudius was no longer enforced following the emperor’s death in 54, the banned leaders apparently began moving back to Rome, but they soon found that they were no longer welcome as leaders in the congregations that had found new meeting places after 49.

ROBERT JEWETT, ROMANS: A COMMENTARY, 59.

Powerful and Non-Powerful

If we take a step back to chapters 14-15, we’ll notice Paul reference two types of people:

Now we who are **powerful** (*dunatos*) ought to bear the weaknesses of those **without power** (*adunatos*) and not just please ourselves... Therefore welcome one another, just as the Messiah welcomed you to the glory of God.

ROMANS 15:1, 7

Now accept the one who is **weak in faith**, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is **weak** eats vegetables only.

The one who eats is not to **regard with contempt** the one who does not eat,

and the one who does not eat is not to **offer judgment** the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to **judge** the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

ROMANS 14:1-5

Scot McKnight provides more details on strong/weak dynamic found in Romans:

“The ‘weak’ are Jewish believers who are in the stream of God’s elect people, who know and practice the Torah, and still probably attend synagogue, but who sit in judgment on gentiles, especially the ‘strong’ in the Christian community of Rome, even though they have no status or power... The ‘strong’ are predominantly gentiles who believe in Jesus as Messiah, who do not observe Torah as God’s will for them, and who have condescending and despising attitudes towards Jews and especially to Jewish believers in Rome, over whom they have superior high social status in Rome... The tension between these is not just a matter of theological differences... “powerful” and “non-powerful” from Romans 15:1 are status terms in the Roman world.”

SCOT MCKNIGHT, READING ROMANS BACKWARDS, 21.

With this in mind, Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt make a profound observation in regards to Paul’s greeting in Romans 16:

*“Notice that Paul does not directly greet his friends and coworkers and relatives in Rome. He has the dominantly Gentile audience do it for him as part of his rhetorical strategy to help effect some sort of reconciliation or unity among the Christians in Rome before he arrives there. In particular, he wants the marginalized Jewish Christians, many of them newly back in Rome from exile, to be embraced. It is not at all an accident that Paul again and again in this passage uses the verb *aspazomai*. This verb does not merely mean “greet” in some perfunctory way. It literally means to wrap one’s arms around and embrace someone, and when coupled with the command to offer the holy kiss as well (v. 16), it amounts to a command to treat those named as family, to welcome them into one’s own home and circle. Paul is going all out to create a new social situation in Rome, overcoming the obstacles to unity and concord dealt with in chs. 14–15.*

BEN WITHERINGTON III AND DARLENE HYATT, PAUL’S
LETTER TO THE ROMANS: A SOCIO-RHETORICAL COMMENTARY , 379–380.

Gift to Jerusalem

In Chapter 15, Paul talks about an offering he is bringing to the suffering church in Jerusalem. In light of the divisions in the Roman church, Paul is creating a common, unifying project through the gift to the Jerusalem Christians.

Ruling Authorities

Chapter 13 contains the often quoted verse in relationship to ruling authorities:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

ROMANS 13:1-2

Here are some situational context points for you to consider as you interpret this passage today:

- Vengeance, being subject to authorities, and paying taxes would be especially relevant for Jewish Christians who don't recognize the Roman emperor as their true king.
- Claudius' expulsion in the past, Nero's tax burdens and Christian scapegoating in the present.
- Jewish resistance to Roman occupation was already boiling in Judea.

Summary

"To read Romans well, we must read it as a pastoral, ecclesial theology for a specific church in a specific time. To be sure, Romans fares well in other contexts, but until we profile [its original context]...we won't know what to make of it for those other contexts. Romans, like no other book in the entire Bible...is more relevant for the churches of the United States than any book of Bible. The message is about a lived theology of Christofornity, manifested in peace among siblings, all siblings, not just siblings like myself. The message shouts to the American church that its classism, its racism, its sexism, and its materialism are just like the "powerful's" social status claims and the 'non-powerful's' boundaried behaviors. These things divide us, and they have conquered us. The message of Romans is that the weak and the strong of our day...must surrender their claims to privilege and hand them over to transformation by Christ."

SCOT MCKNIGHT, READING ROMANS BACKWARDS, 180-181

The Literary Context

We must avoid the modern misconception: Paul and the apostles wrote their letters in solitude, producing a single unedited draft that was hastily sent, or that Paul used a secretary to whom he dictated his letters word for word and then signed and sent the original draft. This mental image is completely out of sync with everything we know about letter writing in the ancient Greco-Roman world of the first century.

There is actually a great amount of first century sources that should inform our reading of the New Testament letters. Many classical Greek and Roman authors have left behind information on the composition and sending of letters, and about the cost, circumstances, and infrastructure that made such letter writing possible in the ancient Roman world. (e.g. Letters of Cicero).

Placing Paul's letters in their first century context, reshapes our perception in significant ways. Let's look at a handful of logistics from first century letter writing.

The Logistics of First Century Letter Writing

Placing Paul's letters in their first century context, reshapes our perception in significant ways. Let's look at a summary of main conclusions from E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection* (2004), and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter Writer* (1995).

1. **The named co-senders of Paul's letters** (Timothy; Sosthenes, Silas) were contributors to the content of the letters. The naming of non-family members in the opening line was not common in the ancient world. They are named because they are contributors in some way, which means that Paul's letters contain material that is both from him and from them, with Paul as the authorizing sender.

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, *To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.*

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, *To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:*

2 THESSALONIANS 1:1

Paul, *called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth...*

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and **Timothy** our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1

Paul and **Timothy**, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons:

PHILIPPIANS 1:1

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and **Timothy** our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

PHILEMON 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and **Timothy** our brother, To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

COLOSSIANS 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and **all the siblings who are with me**, To the churches of Galatia:

GALATIANS 1:1-2

2. **Paul's letters would have been created over periods of weeks and months** in multiple stages and in group sessions with the named co-authors. They would have gathered in guest-rooms, inns, and rest stops on the side of the road, dialoguing and debating about how exactly to word and arrange the letter. Paul didn't have a "study," but was hosted by patrons in houses and inns.
3. **Teachers and writers carried notebooks** (wax-tablets in wood frames or parchment codices) where they would collect notes, write down ideas and short paragraphs, and over time collect materials they could employ in multiple contexts.
4. **Paul's letters contain much preformed material from these notebooks**, such as Old Testament quotations, excerpts from early Christian hymns, teaching traditions, and sermon material that Paul had composed previously (the shared material between Colossians and Ephesians is a great example). This

In Romans, Ephesians, 1-2 Timothy and Titus, Paul's name appears alone.

shows that many letters involved the editing and composition of pre-existing material connected and interwoven with material written for the specific letter at hand.

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the scrolls, and above all the parchments.

2 TIMOTHY 4:13

5. **The apostles used professional secretaries** to write his letters. These were most likely contracted, as the skill-set required was highly specialized. Sometimes Paul or Peter knew a secretary who followed Jesus (like Tertius in Romans 16:22 or Silvanus in 1 Peter 5:12). Secretaries played a variety of roles from gathering materials (parchment or papyrus, ink, writing tools), to transcribing dictation (there were many types of dictation), to composing letters based on the sender's ideas. Paul's letters show a variety of practices.
6. **Paul's letters certainly went through multiple drafts** involving edited material, re-wording and re-ordering material until Paul was pleased with the final product (2 Corinthians is a great example: chs. 1-7, 8-9, 10-13 all read like self-contained sections).
7. **Paul would have retained personal copies** of his letters kept in notebooks and the growing collection provides a plausible context for the first publication of sets of Paul's letters.
8. **Most of Paul's letters were longer than a typical letter** in his time (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians). Letters were very expensive to produce, the letters of Romans and 1 Corinthians would have required the equivalent of \$2,300 to write and send (USD as of 2004, the date of Richard's book).
9. **Letter carriers played a key role in a letter's reception.** They would have performed the letter, explained difficult parts based on personal knowledge of the author's intentions, and answered questions from the recipient. Phoebe (for Romans), Tychicus (for Ephesians), Epaphras (for Philippians), Onesimus (for Colossians and Philemon) are among the named carriers.

“Ancient letter writers composed material in the midst of daily life... Paul would certainly take opportunities afforded by a few days’ stopover in a town to write and work on his letters. Paul preached in synagogues and in the market; he no doubt spoke to guests after dinner in the homes where he was hosted. He debated and discussed material with his team as they walked along the road or aboard a ship. All of these occasions gave opportunities for Paul to write notes and hone material. It is reasonable that Paul, like other ancient letter writers, was always in the process of composing, editing, and polishing material as he traveled and ministered.

The material under construction might best be termed ‘pre-letter’ bits of writing. Composing a major letter, and transferring notes into a complete letter was a significant undertaking... First, Paul and his team needed to locate an available secretary and reach an agreement about when the work would be done and how much it would cost.... When available, the secretary would come with proper materials ready, and begin writing down a first draft based on notes. They would then leave and prepare a written first draft. After returning with the first draft, the team would go over it and the secretary would jot down corrections, additions, and changes noted by Paul and his team. Then the secretary would leave and prepare the next draft. This process would continue until a final draft was approved, and then the secretary would leave and prepare a final polished copy on better materials and with the best handwriting. Needless to say, this entire process required more than a few days! We are wise to locate the writing of the final drafts in places where Paul had longer stays, such as Corinth, Ephesus, or Rome.”

RANDOLPH RICHARDS, PAUL AND FIRST CENTURY LETTER WRITING, P. 91.

The Form of First Century Letters

Sources: Jeffery Weima, *Paul the Ancient Letter Writer* and Ben Witherington, *New Testament Rhetoric*

Ancient letters had a basic form which the epistles conform to. In the following section, we’ll go in detail into each aspect of letter form.

Overview

1. The Opening Address
 - Sender, receiver, greeting:
2. The Thanksgiving
3. The Body of the Letter
4. The Closing
 - Greetings to people; travel arrangements, prayer/praise to God, final note

Part 1: The Opening

Figure: List of sender info found in the opening of the New Testament letters.

LETTER	SENDER	TITLE	DESCRIPTION	COSENDER
1 Thess	Paul	--	--	Silas and Timothy our brother
2 Thess	Paul	--	--	Silas and Timothy
Gal 1:1-2	Paul	An apostle	not <i>sent</i> from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead	and all the siblings who are with me,
1 Cor 1:1	Paul	called <i>as</i> an apostle	of Jesus Christ by the will of God	and Sosthenes our brother
2 Cor 1:1	Paul	an apostle	of Christ Jesus by the will of God,	and Timothy <i>our</i> brother,
Eph 1:1	Paul	An apostle	Of Messiah Jesus by the will of God	
Phil 1:1	Paul	Servants	Of Messiah Jesus	And Timothy our sibling
Col 1:1	Paul	An apostle	Of Messiah Jesus by the will of God	And Timothy our brother
Rom 1:1-6	Paul	A servant of Messiah Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the good news of God	which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,	
Titus 1:1	Paul	A slave And an apostle	Of God of Jesus Messiah, For the sake of those chosen by God and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in the hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior	

1 Tim 1:1	Paul	An apostle	Of Messiah Jesus and by the command of God our Savior and of Messiah Jesus our hope	
2 Tim 1:1	Paul	An apostle	Of Messiah Jesus by the will of God, in keeping with the promise of life that is in Messiah Jesus	
Philemon 1:1	Paul	A prisoner	Of Messiah Jesus	And Timothy our brother
James 1:1	Jacob	A slave	Of God and of the Lord Jesus Messiah	
1 Pet 1:1	Peter	An apostle	Of Jesus Messiah	
2 Pet 1:1	Simon Peter	A slave and apostle	Of Jesus Messiah	
1 John	-	-	-	
2 & 3 John	The elder			
Jude	Jude	A slave and brother	Of Jesus Messiah Of Jacob	

Notes on the expanded letter openings:

- **1-2 Thessalonians** are the most common candidates for Paul's earliest letters, and there are no signs of conflict or that Paul's reputation has been called into question.
- Notice that in **Galatians** onward Paul must assert his own credentials and qualifications. This shows the rising conflicts and tensions that surround him.
- **Romans**: Paul leads with a unifying summary of the gospel to rally the Roman churches toward unity
- **Titus**: themes of Godliness, apostolic authority, and God's truthfulness (in contrast to Zeus in Cretan mythology)

Figure: List of recipient info found in the opening of the New Testament letters.

LETTER	RECIPIENTS	ADDITIONAL COMMENTS
Rom 1:1	to all who are in Rome	Loved by God And called to be holy ones
1 Cor 1:1	To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those... ... along with everyone in every place...	...who have been made holy in Messiah Jesus, holy ones by calling, ... who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:

2 Cor 1:1	To the church of God which is at Corinth...	... along with all the holy ones who are throughout Achaia
Gal 1:1	To the churches of Galatia	
Eph 1:1	To the saints who are at Ephesus	and who are faithful in Christ Jesus:
Phil 1:1	To the holy ones... ...Jesus who are in Philippi, along with the overseers and deacons	...in Messiah...
Col 1:1	To the holy ones and faithful siblings... ...who are in Colossae	...the Messiah...
1 Thess 1:1	To the church of the Thessalonians	in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Messiah
2 Thess 1:1	To the church of the Thessalonians	in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Messiah
Titus 1:1	To Titus my true Son	in our common faith
1 Tim 1:1	To Timothy	my true son in the faith
2 Tim 1:1	To Timothy	My beloved child
Philemon 1:1	To Philemon... and to Apphia... and to Archippus... and to the church in your home	... our dear friend and fellow worker ... our sister ... our fellow soldier
James 1:1	To the twelve tribes in the dispersion	
1 Peter 1:1-2	To the exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia,	who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood
2 Peter 1:1	To those	To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours
2 John 1-2	To the chosen lady and her children	To the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth— because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever
3 John 1	To the beloved Gaius	Whom I love in the truth
Jude 1	To those	To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ:

Notes on the expanded addressee parts:

- **1 Corinthians:** Paul highlight the call towards holiness (a huge theme in the letter), and how the Corinthian churches are part of a universal movement, and not located on an island (hinting at their superiority complex)

- **1 Peter:** Written to churches going through oppression and persecution, Peter leads with a reframe that their lives are held within God's loving providence
- **2 John:** immediately establishes an ethos of trust and connection, due to the strained relationship and distrust created by "those who went out from us" mentioned in 1 John

Part 2: Thanksgiving

Many ancient letters begin with a thanksgiving, usually offered to the gods, for something to do with the recipients:

- 3rd cent. B.C. letter: "Toubias to Apollonius, greeting. If you are well, and if all your affairs are proceeding according to your will, **many thanks to the gods;** we are also well, always remembering you, as I should..." [Papyrus 59076, from Zenon archive, cited in John White, *Light from Ancient Letters*, p. 39.]
- 2nd cent. A.D. letter: "Apion to his father and lord Epimachos, very many greetings. Before all else I pray that you are well, and that you may prosper in continual health, together with my sister and her daughter and my brothers. **I give thanks to lord Serapis** [an Egyptian deity] because when I was endangered at sea, he rescued me..." [Papyrus London #42, cited in John White, *Light from Ancient Letters*, p. 65]
- Paul also wrote thanksgivings in many of his letters, but they are set apart from most ancient letters because (1) his thanksgivings are much longer and complex, (2) they appear in the majority of his letters, more often than in any other letter collections.

"Each of the thanksgivings...is designed to attract the goodwill of the readers and make them more attentive and receptive. But there is no false flattery. The variety of compliments accurately reflects Paul's estimations of the qualities of the different churches. Each thanksgiving also fulfills an introductory role in that it evokes themes which will turn out to be central to the letter."

JEROME MURPHY-O'CONNOR, PAUL THE LETTER WRITER, 62.

Figure: List of thanksgiving prayers found in the New Testament letters.

ROM 1:8-10	<p><i>First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.</i></p>
1 COR 1:4-9	<p><i>I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.</i></p>
GALATIANS 1:?	<p>None.</p> <p><i>"The only explanation for the lack of any thanksgiving in Galatians is that Paul found nothing to be grateful for in the behavior of the Galatians... The abruptness of the reprimand...makes his intense agitation palpable; he is both deeply worried and profoundly disgusted." - Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, Paul the Letter Writers, 60-61.</i></p>
PHILIPPIANS 1:3-6	<p><i>I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.</i></p>
COLOSSIANS 1:3-6	<p><i>We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and multiplying throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.</i></p>
1 THESS 1:2-3	<p><i>We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.</i></p>
2 THESS 1:3-4	<p><i>We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.</i></p>
2 TIMOTHY 1:3-5	<p><i>I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.</i></p>
PHILEMON 4-7	<p><i>I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your participation in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share, into the Messiah. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.</i></p>

Part 3: Body of the Letter

Quote and figure from Randolph Richards, *Paul and First Century Letter Writing*, p. 163.

“Paul’s letters were inordinately long. The typical papyrus letter was one papyrus sheet. In the approximately 14,000 private letters preserved from Greco-Roman antiquity, the average length was about 87 words, ranging in length from 18 to 209 words. The letters of literary masters like Cicero or Seneca were considerably longer. Nonetheless, Paul stands apart from them all.”

RANDOLPH RICHARDS, *PAUL AND FIRST CENTURY LETTER WRITING*, P. 163.

Figure: A comparison of letter length

AUTHOR	SHORTEST LETTER (NUMBER OF WORDS)	LONGEST LETTER (NUMBER OF WORDS)	AVERAGE LENGTH (NUMBER OF WORDS)
All extant papyrus letters (~14,000)	18	209	87
Cicero	22	2,530	295
Seneca	149	4,134	995
Paul	335	7,114	2,495

Letters as Speeches: Ancient Rhetoric

As modern readers, we must remember three things when coming to the body of a NT letters:

1. These letters are written as oratory speeches, they were designed to be read aloud and heard as one coherent statement.

*I charge you before the Lord to **have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.***

1 THESSALONIANS 5:27

*After **this letter has been read to you**, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and **that you in turn read aloud the letter from Laodicea.***

COLOSSIANS 4:16

2. The New Testament letters show all the signs of the Greco-Roman tradition of rhetoric: the art of persuasive communication aimed at eliciting a response from the audience.

*In an oral and aural culture such as the Greco-Roman world, people were geared far more to learning by ear than by eye...Literary documents in early Christianity were intended to be read aloud in the assemblies, not least because most all ancient reading was done aloud. In fact, letters were seen as surrogates for oral conversation, indeed as vehicles for carrying on such conversations. The spoken word was primary, the written word secondary... In our age of millions of books, emails, and texts, it is hard for us to grasp how the visible text was not primary for most people in antiquity... This is why the study of rhetoric in the [NT letters] is such a crucial matter. Paul had written his words so that they might be **heard** as persuasive.*

BEN WITHERINGTON, NEW TESTAMENT RHETORIC, . 97.

Oratory and rhetoric are about the art of persuasion. At all times and places the ability to win others to one's point of view has been esteemed, and in all spheres of life: business, politics, law, relationships. In the democratic societies of Greece and Rome, success in public life depended on eloquence... It was the hallmark of civilization and the characteristic of an educated person. And while some were gifted in finding the key to the audience's heart, the majority were not, and so began the project of studying and codifying the arts of persuasion in Greco-Roman education.

JEROME MURPHY O'CONNOR, PAUL THE LETTER WRITER, 65-66.

There were three main forms of rhetorical speech [Based on Jerome Murphy O'Connor, *Paul the Letter Writer*, 66-68; Ben Witherington, *New Testament Rhetoric*, ch. 2]

Figure: Three main forms of rhetorical speech

TYPE	ORIGINAL SOCIAL SETTING	OBJECTIVE	METHOD	AUDIENCE
Deliberative Rhetoric	The public assembly and forum	To get people to adopt or reject a certain course of action	Persuasion or dissuasion using examples from the past, or projects of future outcomes	Needs to respond through action
Forensic Rhetoric	The law court	To win a judicial case and ensure that justice is done	To attack and discredit one's opponent, to establish one's own point of view as superior	Needs to make a decision
Display Rhetoric	Public events, the royal court	To reinforce communal beliefs, behaviors, opinions	To elevate certain values and behaviors as praiseworthy, and devalue others as reprehensible	Hopefully agrees with the orator

3. The NT letters were designed to accomplish something, not just communicate information.

“Paul never put a pen to paper except when it was absolutely imperative. A letter for him always had a definite goal; he designed it to accomplish something. Lacking any mechanism to impose his will, he could not enforce. He was inescapably bound to persuasion... and in the ancient world, persuasion was a staple of the educated who were all trained in rhetoric.”

JEROME MURPHY O’CONNOR, PAUL THE LETTER WRITER, 67-69.

Part 4: The Closing

The apostles use a standard series of conventions when closing their letters. There were four common elements in letter closings:

- The peace benediction
- Final exhortation
- Final greetings
- The autograph

Readers “often neglect Paul’s letters closings...treating them in a cursory manner [because] they’re often at a loss to explain how a particular closing relates to its respective letter as a whole... [On the contrary], just like the other major sections of Paul’s letters, the closing is carefully and cleverly constructed... It functions like the thanksgiving in reverse. Just as the thanksgiving foreshadows and pointed ahead to the major concerns to be addressed in the body of the letter, so also the closing serves to highlight and encapsulate the main points previously taken up in the body. Consequently, the letter closing potentially has great interpretive value, providing important clues for understanding the key issues and themes addressed in the body of the letter, as well as the apostle’s readers and their historical situations.”

JEFFREY WEIMA, PAUL THE ANCIENT LETTER WRITER, P. 165.

Examples of Closing Statements

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and being and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

Brethren, pray for us.

Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.

I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:23-28

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.

But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.

GALATIANS 6:11-18

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.

For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

ROMANS 16:17-20

Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the saints greet you.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-14

As to all my affairs, Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information.

For I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts;

and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number. They will inform you about the whole situation here.

Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas's cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him);

and also Jesus who is called Justus; these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision, and they have proved to be an encouragement to me.

Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.

For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas.

Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house.

When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.

Say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you.

COLOSSIANS 4:7-18

But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.

Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

2 THESSALONIANS 3:13-18

Through Silvanus, our faithful brother (for so I regard him), I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!

She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings, and so does my son, Mark.

Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace be to you all who are in Christ.

1 PETER 5:12-14

Steps for Tracing the Main Idea and Rhetorical Flow of a New Testament letter

- **Step 1:** Isolate the main paragraphs (= thought units) of the body
- **Step 2:** Study the main ideas/points of the opening paragraph
- **Step 3:** Identify the main ideas and rhetorical goal of each paragraph [repeated words]
- **Step 4:** Identify the relationships between the paragraphs [logical connectors]

Step 1: Isolate the Main Paragraphs

Paragraphs are marked by a complete unit of thought that begins and ends with a “logical” connector:

POINT 1	Logical connector	POINT 2	Logical connector	POINT 3
Feeling healthy is great	“And”	Taking vitamins improves health	“Therefore”	I should go get some vitamins

Step 2: Study the Main Ideas/Points of the Opening Paragraph

Usually, the author will pack the opening movement of thought with the core themes, points, and vocabulary that will be developed through the course of the letter.

Analogy: Beethoven was known for perfecting the technique of the “germ motif” that begins in the opening movement of a work, which is never repeated identically, but developed and repeated with variations throughout the work.

“Beethoven helped to further unify the different movements in multi-movement works with the invention of the ‘germ motive’. The germ motive, or ‘germinal motif’, as it is sometimes called, is a motive that is used to create motives and themes throughout a whole work, without making it obvious that such a thing is being done. Thus, all the themes in a piece can be tied back to a single motive in the work. An early and famous example of this is his sonata ‘Pathetique’, where all of the subjects used in the first movement originate from a germinal idea derived from its opening bar. Similarly, the opening bars of his Eighth Symphony is used to derive motives to be used throughout the whole symphony. This device lends unity to a work or even a group of works (as some motives Beethoven used not only in one work but in many works) without repeating material exactly”

WIKIPEDIA ENTRY ON “BEETHOVEN’S MUSICAL STYLE” ACCESSED ON OCT 16, 2019.

Example from Scripture: Ephesians 1:3-14 is a three-step poem of praise to the Father, because of the work of his Son Jesus and the Spirit. The first and last movements explore the unified work of the Father-Son-Spirit in rescuing and creating a new human family, while the central movement focuses on God’s plan revealed through Jesus: The summing up of all reality as a unified whole in the Messiah.

A	³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Messiah , who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every Spirit-given blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him... ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace...
B	⁶ ...he freely bestowed [that grace] on us in the Beloved... ⁸ ...In all wisdom and insight ⁹ He made known to us the open-secret [Grk. <i>mysterion</i>] of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him ¹⁰ in accordance with his purpose which he pre-planned in him, for the purpose of arranging the fullness of the times , that is, to head-up all things in Messiah, things in the heavens and things on the earth ... ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Messiah would be to the praise of His glory.
A'	¹³ In Him , you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴ who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.

Step 3: Identify the Main Ideas and Rhetorical Goal of Paragraph

Repeated Words

After you identify the main points in the opening paragraph, do the same for each following paragraph. A key to this task is looking for repeated words or “lead-words”:

A “lead-word” (German leitwort) is “a word or word-root that repeats significantly in a text or group of texts, and by following these repetitions, one is able to decipher or grasp a meaning of the text... The repetition may not be of the same exact word, but of the word-root...which intensifies the dynamic action of the repetition... if you imagine the entire text stretched out before you, you can sense waves moving back and forth between key words, matching the rhythm of the text... it is one of the most powerful means of conveying meaning.”

MARTIN BUBER, SCHRIFTEN ZUR BIBEL, P. 1131.

When looking for repeated words, first start in a single paragraph or chapter, then through the whole letter. Here's two examples:

1. Look for repeated words within a **single chapter/paragraph**

Example: Observe the repeated words “spirit” and “adoption/family” in Romans 8.

¹Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ²because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

⁵Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. ⁶The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹You, however, are not in the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. ¹¹And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

¹²Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

¹⁴For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” ¹⁶The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

¹⁷Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. ¹⁸I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

²⁶In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

²⁸And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

³¹What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Observational Summary

- Spirit permeates the entire 1st half: vv. 1-16, and then again in vv. 22-27
- The Spirit vs. flesh is in vv. 1-13
- The “family/child” language is in vv. 14-30, and last of all in v. 32
- The “love” language is only in vv. 35-39
- The “life/death/glory/resurrection” language permeates the entire chapter, morphing and developing as it goes.

2. Look for repeated words/motifs throughout **a series of paragraphs or the entire letter**

Example: Paul’s main thesis of the letter in Eph 1:3-14, centers on how God has “made known the mystery of his will...in the strategic plan about the fulfillment of the times: **that all things would be unified* together in the Messiah, things in the heavens and things on the earth.**” [1:9-10].

***“to unify = head-up all things”** (Grk. ἀνακεφαλαιόω) = to bring into unity and harmony: assumes that the cosmos is fragmented and broken and needs to be put back into an ordered unity; Jesus is the one in whom all things find their purpose and healing. This is why Paul constantly uses words like “make one,” “unify,” and “together” (1:10, 22; 2:14, 15, 16, 18; 3:6; 4:1-6, 7, 13; 5:31). Paul uses this same verb in Romans 13:9 “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and if there is any other commandment, it is **summed up/brought together** in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Unity in the Messiah will be a recurring word throughout the letter of Ephesians. Take a look:

1:22: "And he put all things under his feet and made him **head** over all things in the church, which is his body..."

2:14-16: "And [the Messiah] is our peace [Jew and gentile], the one who made **the two into one**, and took down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility, in his own flesh, having set aside the Torah that consisted of commands with decrees, so that he could create in himself **the two into one new humanity**, making peace, and so that he could **reconcile the two through one body** to God, through the cross, destroying the enmity in himself.

2:18: "through [the Messiah] we **the two of us have access by one Spirit** to the Father."

3:6: "the nations are **fellow heirs, and fellow body members, and fellow sharers** of the promise in the Messiah Jesus through the good news"

3:9-10: "bringing to light the strategic plan of the open secret which was hidden in past times in God the creator of all things, that now, **through the church, the diverse wisdom of God** would be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms..."

4:1-6: As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with **one another** in love. Make every effort to keep the **unity** of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is **one** body and **one** Spirit, just as you were called to **one** hope when you were called; **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism; **one** God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

4:7: "Now, to each **one** a grace/gift has been given..."

4:13: "for the building up of **the body** of the Messiah, until we all attain to **the unity** of the faith and the personal knowing of the Son of God, to be a complete human..."

4:24-25: "Put on **the new humanity** which has been created according to God, in right relationship and sincere truth. Therefore having taken off 'the lie,' speak truth **each one of you** with his neighbor, because **we are members of one another**.

5:18-21: "Be filled up by the Spirit...submitting to one another in fear of the Messiah..."

5:31-32: "'For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and **the two will become one flesh**.' This mystery is great, and I'm talking about the Messiah and about the church. Nevertheless, **each one of you should love his own wife** as he does himself..."

Step 4: Identify the Relationships Between Paragraphs

Logical Connectors

Figure: Logical connectors on the macro-level: Ephesians

	LOGICAL CONNECTOR	LITERARY UNITS
1	1:3 "May God be blessed..."	1:3-14: A Praise song about the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit
2	1:15 " For this reason... I haven't stopped giving thanks..."	1:15-23: A prayer for an apocalypse of power
3	2:1 " And as for you, you were dead in your sins..."	2:1-10: Exposition: Gentiles rescued from death and evil by God's grace-gift
4	2:11: " Therefore remember that you who were the nations by birth..."	2:11-18: Further Exposition: Rescued from hostility and alienation from God's covenant family
5	2:19: Therefore then, you are no longer strangers or exiles...	2:19-22: Mini-conclusion: the nations incorporated into the new messianic temple
6	3:1 " On account of this, I Paul, the prisoner of the Messiah..."	3:1-13: New idea: Paul's imprisonment supports and doesn't diminish his claims about the cosmic messianic family
7	3:14 " On account of this, I bow my knees to the Father..."	3:14-19: A prayer for power to grasp the Messiah's love
8	3:20 " Now, to the one who is powerful..."	3:20-21: A hymn of praise to the Father and Son
9	4:1 " Therefore, I urge you all...to walk in a manner worthy of your calling..."	4:1-16: Promoting the unity of the new humanity
10	4:17 " So then, I say this...that you should no longer walk as the nations do..."	4:17-5:2: The old vs. the new humanity
11	5:3 " Now, sexual immorality and impurity... should not be named among you..."	5:3-14: The dark vs. the light
12	5:15 " Therefore, watch carefully how you walk..."	5:15-6:9: The wise, spirit empowered humanity
13	6:10 " Finally then, be empowered by the Lord... and put on the armor of God..."	6:10-20: The battle of the unity of the new humanity

It's also helpful to look for logical connectors on the **micro-level**, within a single paragraph

1. Identify the main sentences
2. Identify logical connectors and flow of thought

Example 1: Logical Flow of Ephesians 5:15-21; Three contrasts and four manifestations of the Spirit-influenced life.

<p>Contrast #1 a b</p>	<p>¹⁵Therefore, watch carefully how you walk, <i>not as unwise,</i> <i>but as wise,</i> ¹⁶redeeming the time, for the days are evil.</p>
<p>Contrast #2 a b</p>	<p>¹⁷Because of this <i>Don't be foolish</i> <i>but discern what is the will of the Lord.</i></p>
<p>Contrast #3 a b</p>	<p>¹⁸And <i>don't be drunk with wine,</i> which is recklessness; <i>but be filled by the Spirit,</i></p>
<p>Spirit-influences 1-4</p>	<p>¹⁹speaking to each other in psalms, hymns, and spiritual poems, Creating poems and singing in ya'll's hearts to the Lord, ²⁰Giving thanks always to God the Father for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Messiah, ²¹Submitting to one another in reverence of the Messiah,</p>
<p>Two concrete examples of mutual submission</p>	<p>²²wives to their husbands <i>As to the Lord...</i> ²²husbands, be loving your wives, <i>As the Messiah loved the church.</i></p>

Example 2: Logical Flow of Ephesians 1:3-14

Movement 1

³ Blessed be the God and Father
of our Lord Jesus Messiah,
who has blessed us
with every blessing of the Spirit
in the heavens
through the Messiah,
⁴ because he chose us
in him
before the foundation of the cosmos,
so that we would be holy and blameless before him,
in love ⁵having predestined us
for adoption/sonship
through Jesus Messiah
unto himself,
in accordance with the purpose of his will
⁶resulting in praise for the glory of his grace,

Movement 2

which he graced us
in the beloved one,
⁷ in whom we have redemption
through his blood,
the forgiveness of sins,
according to the richness of his grace,
⁸ which he made abundant for us,
with all wisdom and understanding,
⁹ having made known to us
the open-secret of his will,
in accordance with his purpose

which he pre-planned in him,
¹⁰ for the purpose of arranging the fullness the times,
to head-up all things together
in Messiah,
things in the heavens and things in earth
in him,
¹¹ in whom also we have obtained an inheritance,
having been predestined
in accordance with the plan
of the one who works all things
according to the decision of his will,
¹² so that we would praise his glory,

Movement 3

we, who were the first ones to hope in the Messiah,
¹³ in whom also y'all,
having heard the word of truth,
the good-news of y'all's salvation,
in whom also,
having believed,
y'all were sealed by the promised holy Spirit,
¹⁴ who is the first installment of our inheritance,
for the redemption of the possession,
resulting in the praise of his glory.

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