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## SOME COMMENTS ON THE PAULINE PRESCRIPTS

Vincent Parkin.

From Deissmann's 'Light from the Ancient East' and C.K. Barret's 'The New Testament Background Selected Documents' it is possible to choose thirty eight papyrus letters with whose prescripts those of the Pauline letters may be compared.

In a number of the letters the prescript gives no information about the sender or the recipient other than their names. Thus we have in a letter dated 245 B.C., 'Demophon to Ptolemaeus greeting'. Of course, since such letters, in the absence of a postal service, would often be carried by friends, acquaintances, or employees, any additional information the receiver might need to enable him to identify the sender could be supplied by the bearer. We are not concerned with the measures taken to ensure that the bearer delivered the letter to the correct person!

Although in personal correspondence something was often added to the names as, for example, 'Mnesiergus sendeth to them that are at his house', 'Hilarion to Alis his sister', 'Mystarion to his own Stotoetis many greetings', such additions are no more remarkable than the expressions of ties of kinship and affection in correspondence of our own time.

Among the papyri we have chosen are some more formal letters and, not surprisingly, in most of these the sender identifies himself by giving the name of his father, sometimes also the name of his mother, and whatever rank or office he may hold. A good example of this is a letter of 50 A.D. from a village priest which reads, 'To Arius, son of Lysimachus, cogrammateus of Tebtunis, from Psoiphis, son of Harpocras son of Pakebkis, his mother being Thenmarsisuchus daughter of Psoithis and Kellanthis, inhabitants of the village, priest of the fifth tribe of the gods at the village'.

There are fourteen of these formal letters and in all but two of them the sender gives in the prescript more than just his name. In one of the two an elaborate identification is given later in the letter when the sender writes that he is thirty five years old and has a scar on the little finger of his right hand. In the

second letter, which was addressed to King Ptolemy, and to which I will turn again a little later, no more information than the name was necessary, not only because the bearer could supply it, but also because there was with it a letter to an official at the court of the king, and both letters referred to a collection of animals which were being sent to the king by the writer. There could have been no doubts about the identity of this writer.

The form of the prescripts shows more variety than one might suppose from reading what is said in some books on the New Testament. Thus, R.H. Fuller in his 'Critical Introduction to the New Testament' writes, 'The ancient letter began, 'A to B greetings' with the writer's name in the nominative and the recipient's in the dative'. F.F. Bruce, in his commentary on Galatians, writes 'Letters in Near Eastern antiquity were regularly introduced by the formula 'X to Y greetings'', and Barrett in his commentary on 1 Corinthians writes, 'As in every epistle, Paul uses the conventional Greek letter formula, A to B greetings'.

Admittedly such qualifications as Bruce's 'were regularly introduced' suggest that there were exceptions to the A and B formula, but they hardly prepare one for finding that out of thirty eight letters, fifteen, or nearly forty percent, should have the form 'To B from A' and not 'A to B'.

Cranfield, on Romans, is more informative than most commentators. He refers to the ancient western Asiatic style of prescript in which the recipient was often mentioned before the sender and, in a footnote, cites 2 Maccabees 1:1 'To their Jewish kinsmen in Egypt, the Jews who are in Jerusalem and those in the country of Judaea send brotherly greeting'. He also refers to the work of R.H. Pfeiffer on Assyrian epistolary formulae in which there is given as a typical official formula, 'To the King, my Lord! May Habu and Marduk bless the King, my lord!' Cranfield refers also to Lohmeyer who argues that it was on this western Asiatic rather than on the Greek convention

that the Pauline prescripts are based, on the grounds that in the letters of Paul the salutation proper invariably stands as an independent sentence, and this makes possible another feature of the western Asiatic style, namely the use of first and second person pronouns in the salutation. Nevertheless, Cranfield's view is that it is the Greek which has determined Paul's style because the first part of the Pauline formula follows the form of the Greek prescript exactly, with the sender's name in the nominative followed by the recipient's in the dative. He argues that the fact that Paul used his Roman name and not his Jewish name 'Saul' suggests that he would be likely, at any rate writing as the apostle of the Gentiles to Gentiles, or to a church including a large number of Gentiles, to follow or adapt Greek rather than Jewish convention in a matter of external form of this sort.

The term 'western Asiatic' is of doubtful merit: it seems to be understood as an ethnic term, almost as the equivalent of Semitic. But while it might be reasonable to suggest that Paul, despite being a Jew, would use the Greek rather than the Semitic form, this would hardly apply to James or to the author of the Apocalypse, but both follow the Greek pattern of A to B. If, on the other hand, 'western Asiatic' is to be understood in a geographic sense, it suggests distinctions between, say, Troas and Thessalonica which may not have featured largely in the minds of the inhabitants of those cities in the 1st century A.D., and it leaves a question mark against the way to classify letters from Egypt and other places in N. Africa. The term can hardly be understood in a cultural sense. Yet, however imprecise the term may be, the discussions in which it is used prepare us for a greater variety of styles among the prescripts of the papyri than some works have suggested.

Turning again to the letters in Deissmann and Barrett, we find that the usual form in correspondence within a family is A to B, expanded in some cases with terms of relationship and affection. Many of the more official letters, however, take the form 'To B from A', and usually the rank or status of the sender and the recipient are given. Some of these official letters,

however take the form 'A to B', as, for example, a letter of 111 B.C., which announces the government determined price of myrrh, and reads 'Appollonius to the epistatae in the division of Polemon and to the other officials greeting'. In so far as the limited number of letters under examination permit us to generalize, it seems that when a favour is being asked, or a letter, whether formal or informal is addressed from an inferior to his superior, or when courtesy suggests that the receiver should be addressed as was proper in acknowledging superior rank, the preferred form is 'To B from A'.

We referred earlier to a letter to King Ptolemy which was accompanied by one to a court officer (actually the Egyptian Minister of Finance). The sender, a Sheikh of the Ammonites, did not need to give more than his name for identification, and his letter to the Minister simply began, 'Tubias to Apollonius greeting', but the accompanying letter took the form, 'To King Ptolemy from Tubias'. No favour was being requested in either letter, and it seems that only the courteous recognition of the King's rank determined the change in form.

Similarly in a letter of the 2nd century A.D., to a superior, we have 'To Julius Domitius, military tribune of the legion, from Aurelius Archelaus his beneficiarius, greeting'. So also a letter asking a favour (the building of a temple to Serapis) reads, 'To Apollonius, greeting from Zoilus the Aspendian, priest of Serapis'.

One letter, reminiscent of Paul's letter to Philemon is, on that account, worth quoting in full. It reads 'To my master and beloved brother Abinneus the Praepositus - Caor, Papas of Hermupolis, greeting. I salute thy children much. I would have thee know, lord, concerning Paul the soldier, concerning his flight: pardon him this once, seeing that I am without leisure to come unto thee at this present. And, if he slacken not, he will come again into thy hands another time. Fare thee well, I pray, many years, my lord brother.'

When we compare this letter asking for the pardon of a soldier who had fled with Paul's letter asking Philemon

to receive back the runaway slave, we note that despite the similar tone and the nature of the request there is a difference in the form of the prescript. If we omit from Paul's letter the references to the others associated with him or with Philemon, we have, 'Paul, a prisoner for Jesus Christ, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker: Grace to you and peace.'

The style which Paul adopts of 'A to B' is like that of most of the personal and family letters, but it is also like those formal letters which are obviously from the one who is in authority, such as, for example, 'Apollonius to the epistatatae in the division of Polemon'.

We find, moreover, that although it was obviously unnecessary for Paul to identify himself in any way, he states his relationship with Christ Jesus, as he does in every epistle save those to the Thessalonians. We shall come back to the Thessalonian letters so, for the moment, we shall take the opening words of 1 Corinthians as characteristic of Paul's style. If we leave out the reference to Sosthenes, and the description of the church as those sanctified etc., we have, 'Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, to the church of God which is at Corinth: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Although there is a world of difference between Paul's office and that of the Emperor, the prescript which most closely resembles Paul's in form is that which reads, 'Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus Imperator, Pontifex Maximus, holder of the tribunician power, consul designate, to the city of Alexandria, greeting.'

I used to suppose that it was the theological content of Paul's letters which the Corinthians regarded as weightier than his speech. John Wesley's sermons are required reading for all candidates for the ministry of the Methodist church, and many of us must have wondered how he could have moved crowds of people if these printed sermons were fair samples of his preaching, and concluded that he must have had an altogether lighter touch when he was speaking! Perhaps this was also true

of Paul. But Paul himself is not conscious of having preached anything other than the full gospel, and writes to the Galatians that there is not another gospel than that which he preached. The contrast which the Corinthians found between Paul's speech and his letters may, therefore, have been prompted by the style rather than the content of his letters, and perhaps, in particular, by the form of the prescript. 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account' 2 Cor.10:10.

I have already mentioned that the prescripts of the letters to the Thessalonians differ from those of the rest of Paul's letters. The words of 1 Thess. which are substantially the same as those of 2 Thess. are, 'Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace'. The difference between this and the prescripts of the other Pauline letters has long been recognised. As long ago as 1908 Milligan wrote, in his commentary on the letters to the Thessalonians, 'In neither of the Thessalonian epistles, nor in the epistle to the Philippians does St. Paul add, as elsewhere, his official title Apostolos, doubtless owing to the special footing of friendship on which he stood to the Macedonian churches, and to the fact that his authority had never been seriously questioned among them'. Similarly, Lightfoot in his commentary on Philippians wrote, 'The official title of Apostle is omitted here, as in the Epp to the Thessalonians. In writing to the Macedonian churches, with which his relations were so close and affectionate St. Paul would feel an appeal to his authority to be unnecessary. The same omission is found in the letter to Philemon and must be similarly explained.' It is clear, however that the absence of the word apostle from the prescript was not because Paul's affection for the Macedonian churches was so great that he felt that an appeal to his authority was unnecessary or inappropriate. On the contrary he writes, 'nor did we seek glory from men, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ'

Parkin, Prescripts, IBS 8, April 1986.

1 Thess. 2:6, and there is also the very strong 'I adjure you by the lord, that this letter be read to all the brethern' 1 Thess 5:27.

We note that not only does Paul not describe himself in the prescripts to the Thessalonians as an apostle, he does not there mention any relationship with Christ, and that when, in the body of the letter, he does write of apostles of Christ (1 Thess. 2:6) he includes Silvanus and Timothy. The comments of Milligan and Lightfoot that in writing to the Macedonian churches Paul did not find it necessary to describe himself as an apostle, so lumping together Thessalonians and Philippians, obscures the fact that in Philippians (as indeed in Philemon) a relationship with Christ is expressed. The Thessalonian correspondence is unique in having no relationship with Christ expressed in the prescripts.

Paul describes some people as apostles who are not always recognised as such, for example, Andronicus and Junias (or Junia). What is remarkable about his use of the term in Thessalonians is not that he counts Silvanus and Timothy as apostles, but that he calls them apostles of Christ. In his other letters, even when he includes others with himself in the prescript, he distinguishes between himself as an apostle of Christ and the others who are associated with him in the sending of the letter. Thus, in 2 Corinthians, where significantly we find in the prescript the name of Timothy who, as we have seen, is in 1 Thess 2:6 an apostle of Christ, we read 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.' Exactly the same words are found in Colossians. In 1 Corinthians the distinction is between Paul called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus and our brother Sosthenes.

E. Best suggests, in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians, that, at the time of writing Paul may not have formulated fully his own position as an apostle as he did later, and therefore may have been able to consider Silvanus and Timothy as apostles alongside himself. This suggestion would put the Thessalonian correspondence earlier than any of the letters in which Paul is clear about the nature

of his apostleship.

There is, of course, general agreement that 1st Thessalonians is one of the earliest of Paul's letters, but there are a number of scholars who regard it as later than Galatians. Among these are F.F. Bruce and R.P. Martin, while Ridderbos in espousing the South Galatian hypothesis writes, 'The letter would then be among the first, if not actually the first of the letters of Paul preserved for us. This is the judgment also of Zahn in his *Einleitung*.' The question of the earliest of Paul's letters cannot be decided merely by looking at the prescripts, but the form of the prescripts is one factor to be borne in mind. We can most easily account for the form of the prescripts by assuming that the earliest letter's prescript is closest to the usual pattern shown by the letters of that time. This means that the prescripts which express office or status are likely to be later than 1 Thessalonians which, in this respect, is nearer to the usual pattern of contemporary correspondence.

We suggest that from the beginning Paul was conscious of his apostleship, but did not refer to it in the prescripts of letters written before his position was challenged. Once the challenge had been made he made his position clear at the very beginning of his letters by stating his relationship with Christ. This pattern persisted even when the term servant or prisoner was used instead of apostle. And this pattern was followed, in the main, by the canonical writers who came after Paul. We find it not only in the Deutero-Pauline works, with the exception of Hebrews which has no prescript at all, but we find it also in James, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude.

Edgehill College,  
Belfast.

Vincent Parkin.