

GREETING AS A NEW TESTAMENT FORM

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IN THE ancient Greek letter there occurred a phrase which can be called the *greeting*. This phrase has been identified by F. X. Exler as an epistolary form, but was called a wish form — apparently because he wanted to treat it along with the *ὑγιαίνειν* wish and the *ἐρρῶσθαι* wish. He said, "Its basic form is: ἀσπάξου (ἄσπασαι) τοὺς σοὺς πάντας. In this form it occurs during the first century B.C."¹

The greeting did not always appear at the beginning of the letter and is not to be confused with the opening. The greeting was a distinct literary form which was intended to establish a bond of friendship. It was essentially one of those gestures which has little intellectual content but which has emotional expression as its main purpose. It forms a communication bridge even where there is no specific merchandise to be exchanged. It was the epistolary equivalent of a wave of the hand.

As a literary form, the greeting appears in three types, corresponding to the three persons of the verb.

1. In the first-person type of greeting, it is the writer of the letter who greets someone; in P. Tebt. 415, for example:

ἀσπάξομαι πολλά τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ τοὺς ἐνοίκους πάντας.

2. In the second-person type of greeting, the writer tells the addressee to greet someone for him; in P. Tebt. 412, for example:

ἀσπάξου τὴν μητέρα σου καὶ τὸν πατέρα σου.

3. In the third-person type of greeting the writer relays to the addressee the information that a third party greets someone — either the addressee or a fourth party; for example, P. Oxy. 300:

ἀσπάξεται ὑμᾶς Λογγεῖνος.

and P. Oxy. 114:

ἀσπάξεται Ἄλαν Ξάνθιλλα καὶ πάντας τοὺς αὐτῆς.

I. *Elements of the Greeting*

The elements of the greeting are: 1. the greeting verb (some form of ἀσπάξεσθαι); 2. indication of the person who is to do the greeting;

¹ F. X. Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter, A Study in Greek Epistolography*, p. 116.

3. indication of the person who is being greeted; 4. elaborating phrases. The first three are the basic elements of the greeting. The fourth is optional. These elements may be expressed differently in the three types of greeting. In the first-person and second-person type of greeting, elements one and two are accomplished at the same time by the verb. An example of each type is:

<i>locus:</i>	<i>verb and greeter</i>		<i>persons greeted</i>
P. Herm. 14:	ἀσπαζόμεθα		Διόσκορον καὶ Εὐσδαίμονα καὶ τοὺς παρὰ σοὶ παῖδας.
P. Oxy. 1016:	ἀσπάξου		τοὺς σοὺς πάντας.

The third-person type of greeting requires an overt statement of the person who does the greeting; for example, P. Iand. 9:

<i>greeting verb</i>		<i>person(s) greeted</i>		<i>person greeting</i>
ἀσπάζεται		ὑμᾶς πάντας κατ' ὄνομα		Λοπεινᾶς.

The elaborating phrases, which are not basic elements of the greeting, are added to give emphasis to some aspect of the greeting. Usually they serve to modify or call particular attention to one of the basic elements of the greeting. Thus, the adverb *πολλά* is often added to heighten the effect of the verb, as in P. Oxy. 114:

<i>greeting verb</i>		<i>elaborating phrase</i>		<i>person(s) greeted</i>
ἄσπασαι		πολλά		'Αἴαν καὶ Εὐτυχίαν καὶ . . . 'Αλεξάνδραν.

A word or phrase which describes (and often compliments) the person greeted may be added — as in P. Oxy. 1494:

<i>verb and greeter</i>		<i>elaborating phrase</i>		<i>person greeted</i>
ἀσπάξομαι		τοὺς γλυκντάτους μου ἀδελφοὺς		Διονυσοδώραν
		<i>elaborating phrase</i>		<i>person greeted</i>
		καὶ τὴν δούλην αὐτῆς		'Αχειλλίδα.

Or a word or phrase identifying the person who is greeting may be added; for example, P. Oxy. 1582:

<i>greeting verb</i>		<i>person greeted</i>		<i>persons greeting</i>		<i>identifying phrase</i>
ἀσπάζεται		σε		Σαραπίων		ὁ υἱὸς μου
		<i>person greeted</i>				
		καὶ ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ.				

II. Types of Greeting

1. The *first-person* type of greeting is the most direct and personal kind. Where it is directed to the person or persons listed in the opening

(and usually this occurs with the greeting immediately following the opening), it emphasizes the unusually friendly relationship between them. An example of this is seen in P. Oxy. 1677:

<i>opening</i>		<i>person greeting</i>		<i>person greeted</i>		<i>greeting verb</i>
Χαῖρε, Ἀφροδείτη,		Ἀγαθός		σε		ἀσπάζομαι.

Where the first-person type of greeting is directed to someone other than the person named in the opening, it implies that the range of persons with whom the author intends to communicate is not adequately defined in the opening. The range may be greater than the opening has indicated or may be more specific than the opening has indicated. Thus, the letter writer may have formally addressed himself to one or a few members of a household in the opening; but when he enumerates those whom he greets, he shows that he wants to communicate with more persons than those previously listed. It is usually clear that he expects those others to read the letter (or have it read to them), because he does not instruct the formal addressee to greet the others; he does so himself. Examples are numerous and include P. Oxy. 1767:

<i>verb and greeter</i>		<i>person(s) greeted</i>
ἀσπάζομαι		τὴν μητέρα μου καὶ Ἀπολλῶν καὶ το[ύς] παρ' [ἡ]μῶν [π]άντας [κα-]τ' ὄνομα.

One of the valuable aspects of the first-person type of greeting, therefore, is its potential for spelling out the intended readership of the letter.

2. The *second-person* type of greeting is more complicated than at first it seems. It is an indirect salutation. The writer of the letter indicates that the addressee is to greet someone for him. In this way, the writer of the letter becomes the principal and the addressee becomes his agent in establishing a communication with a third party who is not intended to be among the immediate readership of the letter. An example is P. Oxy. 1489:

<i>verb and greeter</i>		<i>persons greeted</i>
ἀσπάζου		Στράτ[ο]ν καὶ Στρατονεῖκη καὶ τὰ πεδ[ία] αὐτῶν.

Ostensively this type of greeting implies a closer relationship between the writer of the letter and the addressee than between the writer and the person greeted. It often also indicates a closer relationship between the addressee and the person greeted than between the writer and the person greeted. Since it implies at least a fair cordiality between the writer and the person greeted, the appearance of a second-person type of greeting in a letter indicates a series of close and friendly bonds.

Actually the relationship gradations hold only in an epistolary con-

text. They do not necessarily reflect the true degrees of relationship. A man might, for example, write a letter to a neighbor and ask that neighbor to greet the writer's parents. Within the context of the letter itself this would imply a closer relationship between the letter writer and the person to whom he was writing than between the letter writer and his own parents; but this would not mean that such a relationship obtained beyond the context of that particular letter. A man could write letters to A and B and in each letter ask the one to greet the other. Thus relational gradations hold only in the context of the immediate epistolary situation.

A good example of the warm relationships which can be expressed with a second-person type greeting is P. Oxy. 295. Here a woman writing to her mother asks that other members of the family be greeted:

<i>greeting verb</i>		<i>person greeting</i>		<i>persons greeted</i>
ἄσπασαι		σὺ		'Αμμωνᾶν τὸ[ν] ἀδελφόν μου κα[ί] . ραπ[.]ν καί [τ]ῆ[ν] ἀδε[λ]φήν . . .

As might be expected, the second-person type of greeting is often used for greeting members of the addressee's family. An example is P. Oxy. 1676.

<i>verb and person greeting</i>		<i>persons greeted</i>
[ἄσπα]σαι		τὴν μητέρα σου

The second-person type of greeting is, therefore, of greater value for informing us of relationships which exist beyond the scope of the letter than of elaborating relationships indicated in the scope of the letter. But we cannot be sure of determining relative degrees of closeness between those writing or reading the letter and others merely mentioned in the greeting.

3. The *third-person* type of greeting is, in form, the least personal type. It is an indirect greeting in which the writer of the letter becomes the agent through whom a third party greets the addressee or greets some fourth party through the addressee. An example of the third party greeting the addressee is P. Oxy. 530:

<i>greeting verb</i>		<i>person greeted</i>		<i>person greeting</i>
ἀσπάζεται		σε		Θεωνᾶς.

An example of the third person greeting a fourth party through the addressee is P. Oxy. 114:

<i>greeting verb</i>		<i>persons greeted</i>		<i>person greeting</i>		<i>persons greeted</i>
ἀσπάζεται		'Αλαν		Ξάνθιλλα		καί πάντας τοὺς αὐτῆς.

Like the second-person type of greeting, the third-person type informs us chiefly of relationships which exist beyond the writer-reader dialogue and beyond the specific occasion of the letter.

III. *The Elaborating Phrases*

Although the basic elements of the greeting provide the most significant information about it, the *elaborating phrases* help nail down specific aspects of the writer-reader relationship.

One group of phrases serves to intensify the relationships indicated by the basic elements or to stress certain aspects of those relationships. This group can be called the *modifiers*. The most frequently encountered modifier in the nonliterary papyri is *πολλά*. This can be used with any of the three types of greeting. See P. Oxy. 1067 (first-person), P. Oxy. 1217 (second-person), and P. Oxy 930 (third person). Here the writer seeks to convey to the reader the thought that his greeting is something special, that it is not just a conventional gesture.

The use of *πολλά* is the most general method of modifying the effect of the verb. It is intended to intensify the warmth of the greeting, but doubtless came in time to seem fairly conventional itself. In any case, other modifiers were also used. Among these were *πρὸ τῶν ὄλων* or *πρὸ παντός*, and *πρὸ πάντων*. These could be used by themselves or could be combined with *πολλά* if the writer were desperate to convince the reader of the warmth of his greeting.

Another elaborating phrase is the *interjection*. This is a fairly irrelevant comment thrown in as part of the greeting. There is no logical reason why the interjection might not be a curse (against a mutual enemy, for example), but in fact the phrase is less subtle and is usually a simple pious wish for good luck of one sort or another for the person greeted. There is something slightly pompous about the interjections which appear in the greeting. They suggest that the greeter's mind is not entirely on the business at hand. The form which they take tells us something about the greeter. They are personality signatures. Into the simple exchange of nonrational goodwill, the greeter projects his hopes or fears. It is as if a person waving his hand at you were to interrupt his wave with a gesture of warning or benediction.

It was fairly common for a writer to send indefinite greetings to a group. He might say, "I greet you and yours," or "I greet the brothers with you," or some such phrase. But some writers apparently felt that this was too impersonal a way to greet friends; so they added a *personalizing phrase*. Usually this was *κατ' ὄνομα* which probably meant "by name" in the sense that each person should consider himself personally greeted. Inevitably the phrase falls short of being as personal as a spe-

cific greeting. A good illustration of this is P. Oxy. 1299, where the writer greets dozens of persons by name or by relationship with those who are named and finally includes one person's family "all by name." See also P. Oxy. 1769.

Another kind of elaborating phrase is the *personal description*. This is any phrase added to the indication of the person greeted which describes him. Usually it will be a word of praise or affection which indicates a special relationship between the writer and the person greeted. An example of this is P. Oxy. 533:

<i>greeting verb</i>		<i>person greeted</i>		<i>personal description</i>		<i>persons greeted</i>
ἀσπάσασθε		Στατίαν		τὴν θυγατέρα μου		καὶ Ἡρ[α]κλειδὴν καὶ Ἀπίωνα

personal description

τοὺς υἱοὺς μου.

Sometimes the personal description is simply a word of identification, such as "your father" or "my brother," added to the name of the person. Where such phrases stand alone (as in "Greet my brother"), they are not to be considered personal description phrases but simply as indicating the person greeted; but if a personal name is added (as in "Greet my brother Harpocration"), then the name indicates the person greeted, and the phrase becomes a personal description.

Finally, there might be an *identifying phrase* which characterizes in some way the person who does the greeting. This can occur in a first-person or in a third-person type of greeting. An example of this rare type of elaborating phrase is P. Oxy. 1067:

<i>identifying phrase</i>		<i>greeting verb</i>		<i>person greeted</i>		<i>modifier</i>
κἀγὼ Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ		ἀσπάζομαι		ὑμᾶς		πολλά.
π[α]τήρ ὑμῶν						

There is some tendency for these elaborating phrases to accumulate in a given writer's greeting. Once elaborations begin, they seem to encourage the user to employ more and more of them. An example of a greeting overloaded with elaborating phrases is P. Oxy. 1160:

<i>elaborating phrase</i>		<i>intensifier</i>		<i>person greeted</i>		<i>verb</i>
πρὸ μὲν πάντων		πολλά		σε		ἀσπάζομαι

personal description

καὶ τὴν σύμβιβόν σου

<i>persons greeted</i>		<i>personalizing phrase</i>
Κοπρίαν καὶ Ἰσίδωρος καὶ Φοίλλων		κατ' ὄνομα.
καὶ Ἑλένη καὶ τοὺς ἡμῶν πάντες		

IV. *New Testament Use*

The greeting is a common literary form in the NT. It appears in the letters of Paul, extensively, and in the Pastorals, Hebrews, I Peter, and II and III John. All three types of greeting are represented, but the second-person type is the most common.

There is only one case of the first-person type of greeting; that is in Rom 16 22, where the scribe, Tertius, adds his greeting to others which Paul is relaying. The scarcity of first-person type greetings does not imply that the relationship between the authors and those greeted was a distant one. The contrary is indicated by a wealth of personal description phrases. In Romans 16, for example, the following phrases are used to describe persons greeted by second-person type greetings: τοὺς συνεργοὺς μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ; τὸν ἀγαπητὸν μου; ἥτις πολλὰ ἐκοπίασεν εἰς ὑμᾶς; τοὺς συγγενεῖς μου καὶ συναιχμαλώτους μου; τὸν ἀγαπητὸν μου ἐν κυρίῳ; τὸν συνεργὸν ἡμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ; καὶ Στάχυν τὸν ἀγαπητὸν μου; τὸν δόκιμον ἐν Χριστῷ; τὸν συγγενῆ μου; τὰς κοπιώσας ἐν κυρίῳ; τὴν ἀγαπητήν; τὸν ἐκλεκτὸν ἐν κυρίῳ. It is possible that the relative lack of first-person type greetings in the NT reflects a certain innate humility on the part of the writers. Perhaps, too, there was such cordiality between the writer and the reader that the former could properly feel that the latter was an extension of his own personality.

The elaborating phrases which were most abundant in the non-literary papyri (πολλά, for example) are lacking in the NT greeting, and the most abundant elaborating phrases are those kinds which are least abundant in the papyri (personal description phrases, for example). Only one stereotype from the nonliterary papyri appears in the NT greeting. It is the personalization phrase, κατ' ὄνομα, used in III John 15. The interjection does not appear at all — a remarkable fact since pious interjections are not unknown in the NT.

There are five clear uses of the identification phrase (Rom 16 21, 22, 23a, 23b; I Pet 5 13), three of them with more than one identification phrase used. In addition, Phil 4 22 probably has an identification phrase as part of the greeting:

<i>greeting verb</i>		<i>persons greeted</i>		<i>persons greeting</i>		<i>identification phrase</i>
ἀσπάζονται		ὑμᾶς		πάντες οἱ ἅγιοι,		μάλιστα δὲ οἱ ἐκ τῆς Καίσαρος οἰκίας.

And II John 13 probably has an identification phrase, too:

<i>greeting verb</i>		<i>person greeted</i>		<i>persons greeting</i>		<i>identification phrase</i>
Ἀσπάζεται		σε		τὰ τέκνα		τῆς ἀδελφῆς σου τῆς ἐκλεκτῆς.

Only one of the identification phrases occurs with a first-person type of greeting. It is Rom 16 22, where Tertius adds his greeting:

<i>verb and person greeting</i>		<i>persons greeted</i>		<i>identification phrase</i>
ἀσπάζομαι		ὑμᾶς		ἐγὼ Τέρτιος ὁ γράψας τὴν ἐπιστο- λὴν ἐν κυρίῳ.

All the rest are used in third-person type greetings. Rom 16 23a is typical of these:

<i>greeting verb</i>		<i>persons greeted</i>		<i>persons greeting</i>		<i>identification phrase</i>
ἀσπάζεται		ὑμᾶς		Γάιος		ὁ ξένος μου καὶ ὄλης τῆς ἐκκλησίας.

A dozen personal descriptions occur in the NT greetings, all of them in the sixteenth chapter of Romans. These have already been cited for their expression of warmth. Indeed, they tell us a lot about the persons described and their relationship to Paul. Only the briefest form of the personal description was given in citing, however. It is probable that the personal description of Prisca and Aquila goes on through 16 4 rather than ending with vs. 3. The same would apply to several other personal descriptions in this section.

By comparison with the nonliterary papyri, there is nothing very astonishing about the appearance of many of greetings with personal descriptions at the end of a letter. P. Oxy. 533, for example, has the final tenth of a personal-business letter given over to greetings, and personal descriptions abound. By comparison with the rest of the NT, however, these are unique. Clearly this indicates that the situation under which Romans was written differed in some significant way from the situation underlying the rest of the letters of the NT. The length of Romans, of course, also marks it off from the other epistles. A look at its use of other forms is, therefore, indicated.

The petition, thanksgiving, and disclosure are handled very much as in other NT letters. But the opening is the longest and the most complicated in the NT; and the closing is both the longest and the most completely pastoral.

On the basis of the use of forms in Romans, we can say that the situation under which it was written differed from that of other NT letters. Since the forms most affected are those which begin and end the letter, we can assume that the body of the letter will be handled much as other epistles but that some circumstance affected the author's approach to and withdrawal from his readers. The extensive use of second-person type greetings warns us not to assume that the explanation lies in the fact that Paul was "introducing himself" to the congregation at Rome with this epistle. It implies that he had close enough rapport with that congregation to let them act for him. Moreover, the closeness to the

congregation at Rome did not lie altogether in the presence there of the list of friends he was greeting. The use of the second-person type greeting means that the persons greeted might not be among those who read the letter. The relationship between Paul and the congregation at Rome seems to be other than scholars have assumed, and no simple readjustment of our old notions is likely to bring it into focus. We can not, for example, simply lop off the last chapter or two and say that they are not part of the letter. The opening and closing are too obviously supplementary for such a solution to hold. And the greetings fit well the length of the letter and its closing. Yet something in our usual interpretation of Romans is wrong; and the way to straighten it out is to establish as much objective data as possible before using the evidence supplied by the contents of the letter.

The final elaborating phrase in the NT greeting is a modifier, *ἐν φιλήματι ἀγίῳ*. Compare the similarity in form of the NT phrase and a corresponding phrase from the papyri:

<i>locus:</i>	<i>greeting verb</i>	<i>persons greeted</i>	<i>elaborating phrase</i>
I Thess 6 26:	Ἀσπάσασθε	τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς πάντας	ἐν φιλήματι ἀγίῳ.
P. Fayum 118:	ἀσπάξου	τοὺς φιλοῦντές σε πάντες	πρὸς ἀλήθειαν.

Interpreting *ἐν φιλήματι ἀγίῳ* in this way requires a slight change in the usual understanding of the NT phrase. It is clearly a greeting from the writer to the third parties, with the readers of the letter as agents. It is not a liturgical or a sociological injunction from the writer to the readers.