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Reading with Understanding: A practical guide to reading other people's mail: New Testament Epistles

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SUBHEAD: A practical guide to reading other people's mail: New Testament Epistles

By Félix H. Cortéz

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Reading other people's mail is both a science and an art. This is especially true when it comes to reading the treasures found in the ancient Mediterranean mailboxes of New Testament churches. The modern reader may have a general grasp of their beauty but does not always understand its value or the meaning of specific intriguing or challenging aspects (think of difficult texts, for example). The purpose of this article is to provide an introduction to the tools that will make it possible for you to have a more "expert" opinion of these ancient documents. This article is divided in two sections. The first section has to do with the mechanics of letter writing in the first-century A.D. It is like a brief furtive look over the shoulder of a New Testament author as he wrote his letters. This will give you insight into the complexities of ancient epistolary communication. The second section has to do with practical suggestions for how to read a New Testament epistle.

Ancient Letter Writing Basics

Modern artists have helped us imagine Paul as a venerable elder, seated at a table, immersed in deep reflection as he writes in solitude a letter to a church on a sheet of papyrus that, we commonly assume, would be sent as soon as it was finished. Almost all the aspects of this picture are wrong.¹

It seems odd, but archeological and literary evidence suggests that ancients wrote without desks. The author simply sat in a stool or bench (or in the ground), holding the “paper” (papyrus, tablet, or parchment) on a stretched tunic around the knees and a palette (with recesses for red ink and black ink) on the left hand. A wet rag was tied to the waist to “wipe out” mistakes with water before the ink dried up. He wrote with a stylus (pen) in his right hand, which was a small reed, around 8 to 10 inches long, cut to make a point in one end. A small split was made in the point. Thus, as a scribe quipped at the end of a manuscript of the Iliad, writing required the cooperation of hand, pen, and knee.

It is most likely that New Testament authors dictated their letters to a secretary as was customary. For example, Rom. 16:22 mentions that Tertius was the secretary who wrote Romans. The role of secretaries may be better described as a spectrum of possibilities. In one extreme, secretaries could be mere transcribers who registered word for word what the author dictated. In Paul’s time, a system of writing in shorthand had been developed, both for Greek and Latin, and some secretaries could take dictation of letters at the speed of normal speech. Scholars argue that Arrian was able to preserve his teacher’s lectures (*The Discourses of Epictetus*) with the help of shorthand. Slow dictation, however, sometimes even syllable by syllable, was more common.

On the other side of the spectrum, the secretary could be the true author of the letter. In this case, the author would ask the secretary to write a letter for someone specifying its general purpose but without identifying the specific contents. After the secretary wrote the letter, the author would review it and authorize it. Both extremes were rare. More often secretaries would be contributors in different degrees depending on the author, the occasion, and the ability of the secretary. Some would contribute in the minor aspects of syntax, vocabulary, and style, while the author determined content and argumentation, but others would have bigger roles.

Letters went normally through at least one draft before a final copy was sent. After an author reviewed and authorized a final draft of the letter, a secretary would prepare a copy for public reading (written on good paper, with a good pen, and with good calligraphy) and make a copy because it was customary that authors kept a copy for themselves. (The collection of Paul's letters in the New Testament probably originated from the copies Paul probably retained for himself.) The author would sign the letter using a seal pressed in clay or, more commonly, by writing a summary of the letter (Philemon 1:19–21) or a word of farewell in the author's own handwriting at the end of the letter (for example, 1 Cor. 16:21–24; Col. 4:18).

Sending a Letter

The Roman Empire had an efficient postal system, which was, however, used only for official matters. Individuals could send a letter by a specially designated carrier, but only rich people could actually pay for this. More commonly, a letter would be sent through family members, friends, acquaintances, and even total strangers who traveled in the desired

direction. In the case of Paul—and possibly Peter—the letter carrier performed additional functions. He would read the letter. Since rhetoric and oral delivery was very important for ancient Greco-Roman society, we should probably think that to read a letter meant actually to “perform” it, providing nuances in voice and expression to better communicate the message of the author. The letter carrier was also expected to provide commentary, elaboration, and clarification to the letter (for example, Eph. 6:21, 22). Interestingly, there are some indications that Galatians and 1 Thessalonians, which did not identify and probably did not use a specially designated carrier, were misunderstood by the receiving churches.

All this indicates that ancient letter writing involved a more complex process than we would imagine today. It was also more expensive. Randolph Richards has suggested, based on the knowledge we have regarding the price of the papyrus and how much secretaries charged, that an educated guess of the cost of producing Romans, the longest letter of the New Testament, would be around US\$2275 today. Philemon would cost roughly US\$101. (This estimate does not include the expenses of the carrier.)

How to Read a New Testament letter?

Epistles are not theological expositions. They are pastoral messages that contain counsels and teachings (as well as, greetings, news, and other things), written to produce a specific effect in a particular audience. In other words, they were designed as a solution to a problem or a set of problems. Therefore, in order to understand a letter, we need to understand the situation it addresses or the problem which it was addressing. Every

interpretation of a letter, or of any section of it, implies, then, a reconstruction of its historical situation.

How do we do this? The task is in some sense similar to the reconstruction of a site based on the archaeological analysis of the “remains” of that site. The New Testament letter is what “remains” from a specific historical situation and we need to reconstruct the rest. I suggest the following process.

1. Before reading any other thing, read the whole epistle in one sitting. This will provide you with an overview of the document.

2. Read the epistle a second time slowly and carefully. The purpose of this reading is to divide the epistle into logical sections. Write an outline of the epistle (like a table of contents for the epistle) and describe each section briefly in your own words. This exercise will help you understand the flow of the argument, identify its different parts, and see how they relate to each other.

At this moment it is also important to make a list of those concepts that the author emphasizes by repeating them or highlighting them at important moments of the argument. Also, make a list of difficult sections or of passages you would like to explore in more detail. It would be extremely beneficial that in this reading you compare different versions (or read from the original if you are able). Any language has words that have more than one meaning, or prepositions and conjunctions that could be used in more than one way. Using multiple versions will broaden your understanding of an epistle.

3. Read the epistle a third time and look for the following information. What does the epistle say about the readers? What does it say about the author? What does the epistle say

about the historical situation? What is the “problem” or “problems” that it seeks to solve?

Then, write a brief paragraph explaining what the problem is (there may be more than one) and how the epistle addresses that problem. Once you have done this, you have reached an understanding of the epistle.

4. Now it is time to read what others have found and to review your conclusions. I would begin by reading what Ellen White says about the epistle in the book *Acts of the Apostles*.²

It is also very helpful to read commentaries and introductions to the New Testament (for example, the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*). Find their historical reconstruction of the epistle and go back to the biblical text to evaluate again the biblical evidence and review your own conclusions if necessary.

5. Now it is time to deepen your knowledge of the epistle. Choose one from the list of topics or passages that interested you in your second reading. Identify important words, images, topics, persons, cities, etc. in that passage and study them. A very useful tool in this regard is a Bible Dictionary. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* is an excellent place to begin. Update your understanding of those concepts and you will be able to have a more “expert” opinion of the epistle.

Finally, a word regarding applying the ethical counsels of a New Testament letter to life today. The epistles contain moral or theological “medicine” for others’ “sicknesses.” The counsels and teachings a particular New Testament letter has were designed to address a particular need in the audience and, therefore, are neither systematic nor comprehensive. As any physician will tell you, we cannot apply automatically the same medical treatment to

different patients, even if they have the same disease. The theological instruction or ethical advice a New Testament letter contains is a dose prepared to help a New Testament “patient” recover in a specific circumstance. This is extremely helpful to us, but we cannot apply it directly. We need to see what different “doses” or “treatments” were applied in different sections of the New Testament or the Bible to the same or similar “diseases” and then reach a conclusion regarding what a biblical author would “prescribe” today.

As you dig in other people’s mailboxes, enjoy God’s special messages to His people—and to you as well.

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POSSIBLE PULLQUOTE: Epistles are not theological expositions. They are pastoral messages that contain counsels and teachings . . . , written to produce a specific effect in a particular audience.

¹ See E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 2004).

² You could also consult the index at the back of the book or the Ellen G. White Comprehensive Edition 2008 CD-ROM.