



General Introduction

In this series, we discuss eleven New Testament epistles: in biblical order, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. Some of these (the letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude) are known as the “minor epistles”. They are called “minor” because they are relatively short, but also because they tend not to be read, in church or privately (or by scholars!) as often as most of Paul’s epistles or the Epistle to the Hebrews. This reminds us that, although all the books of the New Testament are scripture, we tend to give more attention and more weight to some books than others.

Though they are known as epistles, it is not certain that all these books were written as letters. Some may have begun life as sermons or other kinds of teaching material. In the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, letters could take many forms. A Roman emperor could issue an edict to the whole empire in the form of a letter. People wrote diplomatic, business, legal, and private letters, as we do today. Philosophers delivered teaching and answered questions to their students, and people petitioned magistrates or defended themselves against accusations in letters. As far as content goes, therefore, all these writings could be letters. But letters also tended to have formulaic beginnings and endings, which, at their most basic, would look something like: “A to B, greetings/peace to you,” and, “Give my greetings to X and Y, farewell/peace to you.” To this basic formula the writer could add any extra wording she or he liked. Some of the minor epistles (e.g., Philemon, 1 Peter) have a conventional letter beginning and ending. James has a conventional beginning but no ending. 1 John has neither, but 2 John has both. We therefore cannot be sure that all these texts started life as letters – but for convenience it is not unreasonable to classify them as letters.

The "Catholic" Epistles

Seven of the epistles in these podcasts – James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude – are known as the “Catholic” epistles. The Greek *katholikos* means “general,” as opposed to “particular” or “specific,” and these letters are not sent to one particular person or church, but to a group of people or churches. (This is the sense in which *katholikos* is first used of the Church itself: the “Catholic Church” is the collective of all individual local churches and then an entity in its own right.) Three of these epistles – 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus – are known as the “Pastorals,” because they are addressed to individuals with pastoral oversight of a church.

Pseudepigraphy

Of the epistles discussed in these podcasts, Philemon is generally agreed to be by Paul, but all the others are thought to be possibly or almost certainly not by the writers under whose names they have been handed down: they are pseudepigraphic or pseudonymous. Several kinds of pseudepigraphy are recognized in the ancient world. Occasionally a work was produced as what we might call a cynical fake, intended to deceive readers into thinking it was by someone other than the real author. Alternatively (and more commonly), a pseudonymous work could be a literary fiction. The Roman poet Ovid, for instance, wrote a collection of *Letters from Heroines*, fifteen letters from characters of Greek and Roman mythology such as Penelope and Dido. No-one, of course, was supposed to think that mythical heroines had written these letters; they were a literary conceit. Most commonly of all, pseudonymous writings were produced within communities which held the supposed author in high esteem. For example, the ancient Greek world honored the “Seven Sages” of the sixth century BCE, a group of philosophers, moralists, scientists, political leaders, and poets who were credited with helping to shape the classical Greek world. They were remembered as authoring two famous moral maxims which were inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi in Greece: “Know yourself” and “Nothing in excess.” By the early Roman empire, however, no fewer than 148 “maxims of the Seven Sages” were in circulation: written on papyrus, inscribed on stone in many city centers, and taught to children. Probably everyone knew the story of the two maxims, but the other 146 were regarded as in the authentic tradition of the Sages; they were teachings the Sages would have endorsed, elaborated by successors who identified as belonging to communities and

traditions descended from them. It is likely that the pseudonymous biblical epistles are in this tradition. They are probably written by people who revered James, Peter, John, or Paul, belonged to communities in which those apostles were high authorities, and understood themselves as developing teachings which those apostles would have endorsed. In this context pseudepigraphy is an expression of respect and continuity of community and tradition, not an attempt to deceive, and early audiences as well as writers of such books would have understood the concept.

Common Concerns

These letters come from different churches with some different ideas and practices, but they also share some interests and concerns. All, of course, affirm Jesus Christ as Lord, and all are waiting for the coming of the Lord and the end time. All are concerned with the way in which their communities are organized while they wait for the Lord. This can involve an interest in who leads a community and what the qualifications are for leadership. It often includes a concern for good relationships within the community: e.g., between rich and poor, slaves and masters, or wives and husbands. Most of the letters are also concerned with wrongdoing and sin: ways in which people can fail as community members, and what happens when they do. Several are worried about false teachers and teachings and seek to distinguish true from false teachings. All, in some way, are concerned with relationships between community members and outsiders.

It is not surprising that many communities shared these concerns. The first generation of apostles sought urgently to bring people to believe and trust in the one “living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9) and to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. They probably did not stop to offer detailed advice about community organization (though Paul, for instance, does offer advice sometimes, in letters, usually when something has gone wrong). But as the first and second generation of apostles and Christians passed away, and communities were still waiting for the “day of the Lord,” it became necessary for churches to organize and structure themselves. In the late first and early second centuries there was still little in the way of higher or central authorities among Christians – no regional bishops, for instance – so communities must have had largely to work out how to organize themselves, no doubt in dialogue with other, neighboring

communities. These letters probably played a significant role in that process and may have been passed between communities and used to shape more than one.