

ANCIENT LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION AND
2 CORINTHIANS 3.1-3: A LITERARY ANALYSIS

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Introduction

Letters of recommendation are an important component of today's academic and professional culture. They are often a requirement when applying to study in an advanced educational institution or to work as, for example, a physician or a professor; hence, one's future may hinge upon the strength (or weakness) of the letter(s). Some institutions, in fact, place great value in the letter of recommendation and make their decision based more on the quality of the letters than on other facets of the application. Letters of recommendation in our culture may also be characterized by certain conventions, depending upon the sub-culture in which they apply, of course, and particular types of nuanced language are probably used. For example, in a setting where an undergraduate is applying for a graduate program and asks a professor to write a letter for him or her, a professor who cannot write a positive reference will probably advise the student to ask elsewhere. This might qualify as more of a *social* convention to letter writing, but it is a convention nevertheless. On the other hand, some professors may agree to write a letter of recommendation for a non-outstanding student but may use nuanced language, such as 'this student has lots of potential', or something similar. Recipients of these letters are usually apt at 'reading between the lines'.

Interestingly, we have evidence of what we call *letters of recommendation* (sometimes called *letters of commendation*) in the ancient papyri.¹ In these documentary papyri² we find numerous letters

1. Letters of recommendation and introduction (Person A introducing Person B to Person C, for example) were identified as a specific type of letter by ancient epistolary theorists, among various other types such as letters of information, letters

that have some variation of the following format: Person A recommending Person B to Person C for any number of purposes. Sometimes other characters are referred to, revealing more of the specific occasion of the letter. One example of this, which is familiar to students of the New Testament, is Paul's epistle to Philemon, where Paul (Person A) 'recommends' Onesimus (Person B) to Philemon (Person C), with minor characters including Timothy, Aphia, Archippus, God/Father and Christ/Jesus.

A temptation may be to read the function of modern letters of recommendation into ancient ones, but important questions to ask are: what was the function(s) of the letter of recommendation in the Greco-Roman world? Was the purpose the same back then as it is today? Or, are there perhaps some noticeable and identifiable features common to ancient letters of recommendation that are missing in today's parallels? Answering these questions is crucial for a proper understanding of Paul's statement in 2 Cor. 3.1-3, where he metaphorically calls the Corinthian church his 'letters of recommendation' (συστατικῶν ἐπιστολῶν).

While most studies of the Greco-Roman letter of recommendation involve analyses of structure and form (i.e. epistolary theory),³ I am more interested in the content of these letters and what sort of statements are made by the various writers of these letters. Most studies

of solace and letters of assistance (e.g. Cicero, *Fam.* 2.4.1; 4.13.1; 5.5.1). See John Lee White, 'Ancient Greek Letters', in David E. Aune (ed.), *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres* (SBLSPS, 21; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), pp. 85-105 (89); *idem*, *The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter: A Study of the Letter-Body in the Non-Literary Papyri and in Paul the Apostle* (SBLDS, 2; Missoula, MT: SBL, 1972); cf. Clinton W. Keyes, 'The Greek Letter of Introduction', *AJP* 56 (1935), pp. 28-44 (31); Chan-Hie Kim, *The Form and Structure of the Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation* (SBLDS, 4; Missoula, MT: University of Montana Press, 1972), p. 2; Hans-Josef Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament: A Guide to Context and Exegesis* (trans. Daniel P. Bailey; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 72-76.

2. Although letters of recommendation are also found in literary papyri (e.g. Cicero, Pliny and Fronto), a review of Greek documentary papyri should suffice for my purposes. Cf. Roger Rees, 'Letters of Recommendation and the Rhetoric of Praise', in Ruth Morello and A.D. Morrison (eds.), *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Epistolography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 149-68 (151), for a study of Latin letters of recommendation.

3. E.g. Keyes, 'Greek Letter'; Kim, *Form and Structure*; White, *Form and Function*.

of letters of recommendation use epistolary theory, but one shortcoming of this approach is that it tends to focus on issues such as how many parts there are to a letter (usually between three to five) but does not provide many resources for analyzing the core of the letter, the body.⁴ The body, as compared to the opening or closing, is the part of the letter that is the most fluid and least stereotyped. Inevitably, some discussion of form and structure is required, but my main concern is in the content of these letters, especially in what is typically stated in the body, which epistolary theory does not readily address. Considering this I find that a literary approach helps to better address my concern for the content of the letters. My objective in understanding the ancient letter of recommendation is not only to have a better understanding of it, but to have a clearer understanding of Paul's statement in 2 Cor. 3.1-3, where he calls the Corinthians his letters of recommendation.

A recent study by Paul Duff includes a brief discussion of letters of recommendation, but he argues for a more or less common understanding of these letters, which falls into three sub-categories: (1) letters of introduction, where the writer deems the recommended person as trustworthy; (2) letters of commission or authorization, where the writer authorizes the recommended person to take a certain action (although the examples are mostly taken from the New Testament, and he admits there may be some overlap with letters of introduction); and (3) intercessory letters, where the writer intercedes in some way on behalf of the recommended person, sometimes for mercy or help, or for some other type of assurance.⁵ These sub-divisions, however, do not seem to be helpful in understanding the function of letters of recommendation, particularly since Duff himself sees overlap between some of these sub-types. Furthermore, it seems that he does not go far enough in considering the writer's personal involvement with the recommended person.

4. See Cynthia Long Westfall, 'A Moral Dilemma: The Epistolary Body of 2 Timothy', in Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams (eds.), *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form* (PAST, 6; Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 213-52 (213); White, *Form and Function*, p. 9 n. 5.

5. Paul B. Duff, *Moses in Corinth: The Apologetic Context of 2 Corinthians 3* (NovTSup, 159; Leiden, Brill: 2015), pp. 103-15.

Thus in analyzing letters of recommendation from a literary perspective, I argue in this essay that Paul's⁶ metaphoric reference to letters of recommendation is not merely a commendation of his ability and validity as an apostle, as would be the case with a modern letter of recommendation, but that it also involves a vested personal commitment by the writer of this metaphoric letter (i.e. Christ) to represent Paul and take responsibility for him. Although modern letters of recommendation may have an implicit personal investment by the writer, this is not as evident as in ancient ones. Furthermore, studies that focus on any historical letter of recommendation in this Corinthian context miss the point here;⁷ it is a metaphor that communicates the personal, vested commitment that letters of recommendation were characterized by in ancient times. My method of literary analysis will help to make this point clear.

Literary Approach

Though the documentary papyri are categorized distinctly from the literary papyri, it is fruitful to analyze the documentary papyri from a literary approach for a couple of reasons. First, the categories of documentary and literary papyri are somewhat *a priori* and based on imposed notions of what qualifies as such. It was Deissmann who classified these documents in *Light from the Ancient East* as non-

6. Although the authorship and literary integrity of 2 Corinthians is debated, I simply use the nomenclature 'Paul' to refer to the author of this letter. Since literary approaches do not typically concern themselves with the historical veracity of the text but take the text at face value—in other words, the question of historical accuracy is not a concern for literary approaches per se—I simply refer to the author of 2 Corinthians as Paul.

7. For example, see Margaret M. Mitchell, 'Paul's Letters to Corinth: The Interpretive Intertwining of Literary and Historical Reconstruction', in Daniel N. Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen (eds.), *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (HTS, 53; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 307-38; Duff, *Moses in Corinth*, 110-12. Duff states that the mention of letters of recommendation by Paul in 2 Cor. 3:1-3 'strongly suggests that the community had indeed requested letters of recommendation as a guarantee of Paul's honesty. In light of their suspicions, the community likely let it be known to Paul that they would no longer cooperate with him to raise money for Jerusalem unless he provided them with commendatory letters from a trusted third party (or parties) assuring them of the apostle's πίστις' (*Moses in Corinth*, p. 112).

literary,⁸ arguing that these papyri are to be considered non-literary based on his definition of *literature*, which is ‘something written for the public (or at least *a* public) and cast in a definite artistic form’.⁹ A problem with this definition is the question of what constitutes a piece of writing as having a ‘definite artistic form’. I am not arguing that Homer’s *Iliad*, for example, is *non-literary*, but I am proposing that, perhaps, we can reconstruct a literary context of situation based on the content of many of these documentary papyri.¹⁰ For example, in all of these letters, there are at least two parties involved in some kind of relationship, whether familial, cordial, professional or otherwise, and we can decipher from the content of the letter some sort of material situational setting. Based on a probable reconstruction of the context, we can determine a (short) storyline involving main characters, background characters, plot and perhaps even other literary features such as problem, climax and resolution. To be clear, I am not arguing that the documentary papyri are literary—I am arguing that their being non-literary does not necessarily preclude a literary analysis of a letter based on a reconstructed storyline.

This sort of procedure was developed and illustrated by Norman Petersen several decades ago.¹¹ He attempts to reconstruct the ‘narrative

8. Cf. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World* (rev. ed.; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), pp. 4, 36. Deissmann writes: ‘The papyri are almost invariably non-literary in character. For instance, they include legal documents of all possible kinds: leases, bills and receipts, marriage-contracts, bills of divorce, wills, decrees issued by authority, denunciations, suings for the punishment of wrong-doers, minutes of judicial proceedings, tax-papers in great numbers. Then there are letters and notes, schoolboys’ exercise-books, magical texts, horoscopes, diaries, etc. As regards to their contents these non-literary documents are as many-sided as life itself’ (p. 36).

9. Deissmann, *Light*, p. 148.

10. However, White seems to refer to various literary analyses of the letter tradition, somewhat similar to what he does in his study of the form and function of the Greek letter (White, *Form and Function*, pp. 1-2). It seems that, for White, while the Greek letters are considered documentary papyri, it is still valid to apply a literary analysis to them, depending on what the objective is. It seems both White and I are concerned with the content of the Greek letter, and, more specifically for me, the content of the letter of recommendation.

11. Petersen bases his methodology on the works of Umberto Eco, which is related to reader-response criticism, and Roman Jakobson, which is related to semiotics. In some sense, this approach to analyzing the documentary papyri is a

world' of the Epistle to Philemon, based on the contents of the letter: 'By using the literary notion of "narrative world," we gain a world to explore, namely the world referred to in the Letter to Philemon and the world referred to in the total corpus of Paul's letters.'¹² Though 'narrative world' is not typically used in literary criticism, other similar words are used, and these are in general reference to 'the world as it is represented in narrative texts'.¹³ Petersen also includes epistolary and other texts as well, since he is applying his methodology to the Epistle to Philemon. This is based on the assumption that 'in letters the form of discourse, of speaking to someone, subordinates the story and its narrative world to the presentation of the message ... In narratives, the message is in the story. In letters, the story is in the message.'¹⁴ He then writes:

The two principal differences between letters and stories therefore lead to the conclusion that while letters are not narratives they nevertheless refer to narrative worlds. These worlds must be constructed from the events and relations referred to in a letter, and the contextual *history* thus referred to must be *reconstructed* from the letter's narrative world.¹⁵

It is more than reasonable to assume that behind letters are circumstances, events, history and social interactions, among other factors, that can be reconstructed from analyzing the contents of the letters. In other words, there is a context of situation behind these letters, since these letters were not written in a context-less vacuum. But in fact, Petersen is interested in not only reconstructing a narrative from letters, but identifying the sociological relationships that are evident in the letters: 'Our concern ... is to establish methods for moving from letters to their stories, but also for moving back to the letters from the stories, since the whole point of the project is to see what the stories can tell us about the letters. To this end, our focus will be on a narratology of letters, on viewing letters in the light of their

reader-response approach, since the text is being reconstructed by the reader; but this is simply to gain access to a text that does not exist. Cf. Norman R. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 33 n. 3.

12. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul*, p. 1.

13. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul*, p. 33 n. 3.

14. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul*, p. 9.

15. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul*, p. 9.

narratives.¹⁶ This is precisely what I intend to do for the documentary papyri.¹⁷ Though Petersen's work received some criticism, it has been largely met with applause.¹⁸

There is a second reason why I find analyzing the documentary papyri through a literary approach fruitful. Though the more popular methodology today for studying the epistles of Paul may be epistolography and/or epistolary theory (literary approaches seem to be applied mostly to the Gospels and Acts),¹⁹ my evaluation is that these approaches are more interested in addressing structural and functional issues rather than the content of the body of the letter, as I have mentioned already.²⁰ While epistolography and epistolary theory may be fruitful for these purposes, structure and function are peripheral for this study because I am interested in content. For example, one of the most often cited works regarding the ancient Greek letter is John Lee White's *Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter*. In it, he states explicitly that he is primarily interested in the structure of the Greek letter: 'The primary purpose of this study is the structural analysis of the body of the Pauline letter.'²¹ Stanley Porter also notes: 'The major terms of the debate tend to revolve around whether the New Testament letters and especially the letters of Paul follow the three-, four-, or five-part structure.'²² Hence, I find that a form of literary

16. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul*, p. 43.

17. I echo Eco's sentiment that 'It is usually possible to transform a non-narrative text into a narrative one' (Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations of the Semiotics of Texts* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979], p. 13).

18. See for example D. Francois Tolmie, 'Tendencies in the Research on the Letter to Philemon', in D. Francois Tolmie (ed.), *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter* (BZBW, 169; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 1-27 (17), where he notes that it is still the leading sociological study of Philemon to date.

19. Another popular approach to studying the epistles of Paul today, which concerns itself more with content than epistolary theory, is called *rhetorical criticism* or the *New Rhetoric*. However, this approach, with its strengths and weaknesses, does not address the issues with which I am concerned.

20. However, see White, *Form and Function*, esp. p. 3, where he states his interest to be the 'Pauline letter-body', but this is still restricted to structure and form.

21. White, *Form and Function*, p. 1.

22. Stanley E. Porter, 'A Functional Letter Perspective: Towards a Grammar of Epistolary Form', in Porter and Adams (eds.), *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form*,

analysis is helpful to address my question. Since my interest is related more to issues of content, namely what sort of contents qualifies a letter to be a letter of recommendation, a literary approach to analyzing these letters seems to be more appropriate.

But contrary to popular belief, literary criticism is not a monolithic approach (as many in biblical studies might consider it) but actually a multi-variegated category of approaches that all have the task of analyzing literature, or as William Beardslee has noted, ‘the effort to understand literature’.²³ Of course, the problem arises when one tries to identify *literature*, since the meaning of *literature* can be wide-ranging. Without being overly fastidious with all of the extant approaches within literary criticism, I combine the general approach of Petersen as described above with the literary method popularized by David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie (RDM), called narrative criticism, which is essentially a renewed form of New Criticism or formalism.²⁴

RDM identify five key elements for analyzing a text according to narrative criticism.²⁵ First is the *narrator*. The narrator refers to the way the story is told—this is the voice of the storyteller. Second is the *setting*. The setting is the context of the story. It is the world of the

pp. 9-31 (9). This is also illustrated by Troy Martin’s essay in the same volume regarding the Pauline letter body, where he limits the discussion to identifying the structure of the body of the Pauline epistles, although the subtitle of his chapter is ‘Issues, Methods, and Approaches’ (Troy W. Martin, ‘Investigating the Pauline Letter Body: Issues, Methods, and Approaches’, in Porter and Adams (eds.), *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form*, pp. 185-212). In addition, Sean Adams notes that most of epistolary theory lacks discussion regarding the body of the letter, focusing more on structural issues, such as the debate between the three-, four- or five-part structure of a letter (Sean A. Adams, ‘A Fresh Look at First Thessalonians: The Amalgamation of Discourse Analysis and Epistolary Theory to Evaluate the Pauline Letter’ [unpublished M.A. Thesis, McMaster Divinity College, 2008], p. 22).

23. William A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 1.

24. Narrative criticism is a term strictly used by biblical scholars, and it is not found in the general literature on the subject. It is basically a revival of New Criticism in its textual interest, except certain proponents of it include elements of reader-response criticism. Cf. James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), pp. 18 n. 4, 30-32.

25. David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of the Gospel* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 6-7.

story, namely the time and place in which the story is told. Third is the *plot*—the events that take place in the story. It is the order in the narrative, the events, the conflicts, the climax of the story and the resolutions that are described in the story. Fourth is the *characters*. The characters are the actors in the story—their identity, their motives, their drives, their traits, their sociability, as well as the changes and developments they make in the story. These four elements, they note, actually reflect overall life. ‘Together, these four features in a narrative comprise a way of viewing the world that readers might consider for their own lives.’²⁶ Last on the list is *rhetoric*, which refers to the various ways in which the author describes and illustrates the story in such a way as to convince the reader to enter his/her world as reflected in the story. ‘A study of the rhetoric of Mark’, for example, ‘identifies how the narrative may transform its readers’.²⁷

Petersen’s method consists of identifying the actions referred to or implied in the letter to reconstruct a chronological sequence, or what he calls referential sequence.²⁸ While this is helpful, I find that this only addresses the issue of *plot*, and combining this with RDM’s approach seems to provide a more robust and comprehensive method for reconstructing a story from these letters. By doing this, I am assuming that each letter betrays a (small) story of life in the ancient Greco-Roman world.

Documentary Papyri

The documentary papyri are numerous, and it goes without saying that it is impossible to condense summaries of all of them into the confines of this paper.²⁹ I have briefly analyzed a select portion of them found in White, *Light from Ancient Letters*, Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* and Kim, *Form and Structure*. I have selected the documents that are more easily discernible (containing a relatively low degree of mutilation) and have analyzed them according to the five literary elements of RDM: narrator, setting, plot, characters and rhetoric (although not always in this order), in order to reconstruct some kind of

26. Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark as Story*, p. 7.

27. Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark as Story*, p. 7.

28. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul*, pp. 47-48.

29. For example, Kim lists 83 such letters in his study (*Form and Structure*, pp. 150-238).

narrative world behind each of the letters. Although some of these documents may not contain one or more of these elements due to their brevity, I have tried to identify these as much as possible. The letters are identified by sender and recipient (serves as the title), document number and date.

Sostratos to Zenon (P.Mich. I 6; Mar 24, 257 BCE)³⁰

White labels this as a ‘somewhat literary letter of recommendation’, although the reason(s) for labeling this as such is not clearly stated.³¹ The narrator of this ‘story’³² is Sostratos, who is also the writer of this letter. Sostratos writes to Zenon regarding Aischylos, who is presumably sent by Sostratos to meet a fourth person, Kleonikos. The letter is less a defense of Aischylos than it is a request by Sostratos to have Kleonikos meet him.

The setting is not entirely clear, but it appears that Sostratos sends Aischylos, or, at the very least, knows of Aischylos going to Zenon, and wants him to meet Kleonikos. Sostratos writes: ποιήσαις φιλοτιμηθεῖς ὅπως ἂν συστήσῃς αὐτὸν Κλεονίκῳ; it is translated by White as: ‘Please make a sincere effort to introduce [συστήσῃς] him to Kleonikos.’³³ Discussion of the meaning of συνίστημι will be given below, but it conveys a stronger idea than mere introduction. It is a recommendation, implying a vested interest on the part of the recommender. This is probably one reason why this letter is considered to be within the category of letter of recommendation, although of course the mere presence of this word does not necessitate it.

The characters of this story have been identified already. The subject of this letter, and the whole reason for the letter, is Aischylos, who has a desire or need of some sort to be introduced to Kleonikos. The writer of the letter is Sostatros, who apparently has a positive enough of a reputation to make such a request. Zenon is the recipient of the letter and is the person who can fulfill this request; and Kleonikos is the

30. White, *Light*, pp. 34-35.

31. White, *Light*, pp. 34-35.

32. For this section, I will loosely refer to the letter as a *story* when referring to the ‘underlying story’ behind each letter. Although of course we do not have a complete picture of each story, understanding the various elements of the letter will help us decipher the ‘storyline’, at least sufficiently enough to know what is going on.

33. White, *Light*, p. 34.

person who is able to meet the need of Aischylos, for whatever the purpose of introduction is. A significant character in this letter is Zenon, from whom we have the Zenon archives, the ‘largest, best preserved archive of Hellenistic papyrus documents’.³⁴ Zenon was a personal agent to Apollonios (who is the writer of the next letter in this study); Apollonios was a *dioikētēs* (διοικητής), a minister of finance, a notable position of prestige and authority. Zenon often represented and acted on behalf of his employer, and many of his letters reflect this understanding. For example, in *P.Cair.Zen* I 59015, which is a collection of five letters drafted by Zenon, the subject matter is a transaction regarding three slaves being held for ransom, and who have run away. Zenon is the director of this transaction, and he requests intermediaries to assist him in this recovery.

The plot of this letter may be reconstructed as follows: Aischylos is traveling an unknown distance, though it must be somewhat significant, to reunite with Zenon, whom both the writer Sostratos and Aischylos know. His purpose in traveling (at least one of them) is to be acquainted with Kleonikos for an unknown reason, except to be benefitted somehow. Sostratos asks for an introduction (or more literally, a recommendation) for Aischylos, and states that he owes him a favor in return for this introduction, signifying the vested interest that Sostratos has in this introduction/recommendation. Zenon is to introduce Aischylos to Kleonikos. We can assume that this introduction is made because of Zenon’s influence; we can also assume that Sostratos’s request has been fulfilled, based on the influential position of Zenon, and Aischylos being known by both Zenon and Sostratos.

As far as the fifth element of rhetoric goes (this is not to be confused with formal Greco-Roman rhetoric but loosely related to persuasive and argumentative strategies of the writer), Sostratos presents some level of argumentation to Zenon. He notes that both he and Zenon know of Aischylos; he states his own personal interest in Aischylos (σπεύδω γὰρ περὶ αὐτοῦ); and he presents an ‘IOU’ to Zenon as well. In effect, Sostratos says, ‘I’m interested in Aischylos; you should be too.’

Apollonios to Sarapion (P.Mert. II 62; 6 CE)³⁵

Apollonios, the writer of this letter, sends someone (possibly his slave) from his household to Sarapion to fulfill whatever request he should

34. White, *Light*, p. 27.

35. White, *Light*, p. 117.

provide. The notable issue in this letter, according to White, is that Sarapion, the recipient, is given two titles, *στρατηγῶι* and *γυμνασιάρχωι* (governor and gymnasiarch).³⁶ White notes that ‘this particular combination of offices is striking’³⁷ because a governor was a civil and military position of Rome, while the latter was a position associated with the metropolis (the capital of each nome) and consequently not a governmental position. The gymnasiarch was the head of the gymnasium and responsible for running its basic operation. So Sarapion is a person who has a high position both in Rome and in the metropolis.

As in all of these stories,³⁸ the narrator, Apollonios, is also the letter writer. He appears to have a member of his household that he sends over to Sarapion for an unstated purpose. The setting of the letter is vague, and not enough clues exist in the letter to make too much of a determination as to what the setting is. However, we do know that Apollonios is eager to recommend Isidoros, as he writes, *ἔρωτηθεῖς ἔχε αὐτὸν συνεσταμένον* (‘I asked that you have him be recommended’). Note the use of the word *συνίστημι* again. What we also know from this letter is that the recipient, Sarapion, is a person of high position and power, but Apollonios must be as well, for him to request Sarapion to fulfill whatever request Isidoros, the member of his household, has.

As already evident, there are three characters: Apollonios the writer, Sarapion the recipient and Isidoros the subject of the letter. This is not the same Apollonios of the previous letter, since at least 250 years lie between these two letters. Isidoros is probably a slave in Apollonios’s household, but this does not have to be the case. Both Apollonios and Sarapion are in high positions of power, but there also seems to be a mutual respect between the men, at least from Apollonios to Sarapion, as he wishes him *many* greetings and continual good health—a wish for good health, as Apollonios communicates in this letter, communicates a degree of familiarity or intimacy between the writer and reader.³⁹

The rhetoric here, as will likely be in all the letters of recommendation, revolves around the recipient granting a favor to the writer, and the writer promising reciprocation upon granting this favor.

36. White, *Light*, p. 117.

37. White, *Light*, p. 117.

38. Petersen explains that ‘the letter’s author becomes the narrator of his story by creating for himself a retrospective point of view like that of a bona fide narrator’ (*Rediscovering Paul*, p. 45).

39. White, *Light*, p. 19.

Apollonios states that he will return the favor ‘in the same way’ (ἀνόκνωσ ποήσωι πρὸς αὐτῶν ὁμοια).

*Theon to his Brother Herakleides (P.Oxy. IV 746; 16 CE)*⁴⁰

This letter involves three characters: Theon, the writer of the letter (and the narrator); Herakleides, his brother and recipient of the letter; and Hermophilos, the courier and subject of the letter. Theon’s purpose of writing to his brother is to ‘recommend’ Hermophilos to him. Hermophilos is a relative of someone that is known by both Theon and Herakleides, whose name is provided only partially: ‘...erios’.⁴¹ I suppose he would be a fourth character.

The setting of this story is not explicit, but we do know that Hermophilos is traveling to (the city of) Kerkemounis. We can conclude that Herakleides must also be in Kerkemounis, or at least in that vicinity. Hermophilos is traveling to Kerkemounis for business purposes and apparently needs some sort of favor; Theon requests that he would ‘assist him according to what is right’ (σπουδάσεις κατὰ τὸ δίκαιον).

Theon does not seem as eager and unequivocally committed to Hermophilos as the writers in the previous letters (or in the rest of the examples in this paper for that matter). Unlike the others we have examined already, Theon is a bit more reserved in his recommendation of Hermophilos. This conclusion is based on a couple of reasons. First, he states that his reason for writing is to fulfill the request of Hermophilos: ἠρώτησέν με γράψαι σοι (‘he has asked me to write to you’). It is not of his own accord, but he is apparently doing a favor for Hermophilos. Secondly, his recommendation is accompanied by two qualifications: (1) *it meets his approval* (τοῦτο οὖν ἐάν σοι); and (2) *it should be according to what is right* (κατὰ τὸ δίκαιον).⁴² Perhaps Theon is unsure of Hermophilos’s need for assistance, perhaps he does not know of the nature of the assistance, or perhaps Theon is not entirely supportive of Hermophilos’s need; in any case, Theon reserves the

40. White, *Light*, p. 118.

41. White, *Light*, p. 118.

42. While this observation would be beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that the word δίκαιον appears in such a non-religious, non-theological document. Here, it simply means ‘what is right’, without regard to any theological contours. Perhaps, it is beneficial to note its usage here for understanding its use in the New Testament.

discernment of this request for his brother when Hermophilos approaches him. There is the missing element of ‘I owe you a favor if you do this for him’ that is characteristic of other letters of recommendation. Another missing element is the use of the word *συστήμι* by Theon.

The rhetoric in this letter is somewhat neutral or even negative, due to the various qualifications given by Theon to fulfill the request. The language is reserved, and this letter is less a letter of recommendation than it is a letter of introduction (though these two are equated by most epistolary theorists⁴³). The difference is stated below, but it appears that the introduction lacks motivation, while the recommendation contains a personal interest. In any case, Hermophilos has business in Kerke-mounis and is in need of assistance from Herakleides. Hermophilos knows of Theon, his brother, and asks for a letter of recommendation from him to send when he arrives. Theon agrees to this, but not with full enthusiasm as in other letters of recommendation. Perhaps Hermophilos does not have an upstanding reputation in the community, or perhaps his request is absurd or disagreeable. Whatever the case is, Theon is not fully supportive of Hermophilos, but reluctantly writes this letter to his brother. With that analysis, it seems fitting to classify this as a letter of introduction rather than as a letter of recommendation—the distinction being that the former has lesser force of personal investment than the latter.

*Theon to Tyrannos (P.Oxy. II 292; c. 25 CE)*⁴⁴

This Theon is apparently the same person as the above document, namely because the same brother, Herakleides, is mentioned (actually, here he is the subject of the letter).⁴⁵ In any case, this time, Theon recommends his brother to a third party, Tyrannos, who is a *dioikētēs*, the king’s minister of finance during the Ptolemaic era and responsible for areas such as taxation and supervision of agricultural production. But in Roman times, with which I am more concerned, the *dioikētēs* was a financial administrator of a more restricted scope. The title was also given to subordinate officials in both periods. This position in the

43. E.g. Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (LEC, 5; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 153.

44. White, *Light*, pp. 118-19.

45. White, *Light*, p. 118.

Roman period was diminishing considerably.⁴⁶ Aside from Theon, Herakleides and Tyrannos, there is a fourth character in this story, Hermias, the brother of Tyrannos. He is a faint character but an important one nevertheless, as Theon calls upon his witness of Herakleides as a reputable person. The narrator, of course, is Theon.

The setting of this story is unknown, as there are no references to locations and such in this letter. The plot, on the other hand, and the manner in which Theon writes this letter, is quite significant, especially in comparison with the other letter described above. First of all, Herakleides is also the courier of this letter and travels to where Tyrannos is, likely in Oxyrhynchus (as the letter was discovered among the papyri there). But more importantly, Theon *wholeheartedly* recommends his brother to Tyrannos, as he writes, παρακαλῶ σε μετὰ πάσης δυνάμεως ἔχειν αὐτὸν συνεσταμένον ('I urge you with all [my] power to have him recommended').⁴⁷ While he does not use this language for Hermophilos in the previous letter, he uses it for Herakleides. This may trump a possible theory that Theon might have been a rather shy and reserved fellow, based on the reserved language in his letter. One reason for such a strong recommendation (μετὰ πάσης δυνάμεως ['with all power']) is probably because he is his brother. If his brother was of poor character, we might assume Theon would not have written such a strong letter but nuanced it like he did for Hermophilos above. But we can assume that Herakleides is worthy of such a recommendation by his brother; he is also a *basiliko-grammateus* (royal secretary) of the Oxyrhynchus and Kynopolite nomes, an ostensibly prestigious position.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Theon writes: χαρίεσαι δὲ μοι τὰ μέγιστα ἐάν σου τῆς ἐπισημασίας τύχηι ('you will give me the greatest [favor] if he receives your attention'). In other words, Theon tells Tyrannos that fulfilling his brother's request is the same as fulfilling his own request; in fact, it is the *greatest* fulfillment.

Herein is the rhetoric that Theon uses in this letter, which is conspicuously missing from his previous letter. Theon uses words and phrases like παρακαλῶ, μετὰ πάσης δυνάμεως and words like μέγιστα to highlight the intensity by which he would like for his brother's request to be fulfilled by Tyrannos. He also brings a second witness to the stand, Tyrannos' own brother, to testify to the character of Herakleides.

46. White, *Light*, pp. 118, 225.

47. White, *Light*, p. 118.

48. White, *Light*, p. 118.

Gemellus to Apollinarius (P.Mich. VIII 498; II CE)⁴⁹

White attaches two letters together, both with Julius Apollinarius (fuller name) as the recipient and with the two writers as his brothers, Gemellus and Sabinianus, respectively.⁵⁰ He includes only two of about a half dozen letters in *P.Mich.* VIII (496-502), which are all addressed to Apollinarius. However, since only the first of these appear to be a letter of recommendation, I confine my analysis to one among this collection.

Gemellus is the writer, narrator and the brother of the recipient of this letter. Apollinarius, the recipient of the letter and brother to Gemellus, is also called a ‘veteran’ (οὐετρανώι) on the verso of the letter. There are other minor characters in this letter as well. Rullius is mentioned, a good friend of Apollinarius who expressed concern for Gemellus for some reason and introduced him to Aemilianus in place of Apollinarius. Not much is said about Aemilianus, except that introduction to him was important to Gemellus. Aemilianus also apparently sent a letter to Apollinarius, and so did Rufus and Chariton, although not much is known about the latter two. The main characters, then, are Gemellus the writer and Apollinarius the recipient; the minor characters who serve as background are Aemilianus, Rullius, Rufus and Chariton, all of whom have played some role in assisting Gemellus.

The setting of the letter is uncertain, although the plot may be reconstructed in this manner: Gemellus seems to have been in need of some kind of aid, significant enough where his brother Apollinarius ‘was concerned’ (μεριμνήσαντι) about him. Apollinarius, being the good (presumably) older brother that he was, wrote a ‘letter of recommendation’ (ἡ σύστασις) for him to an unknown recipient. This letter did the trick, as it somehow alleviated whatever trouble or problem Gemellus experienced. Rufus, a good friend of Apollinarius, was also concerned and presumably helped him out by introducing him to Aemilianus eagerly (ἀνόκνωσ και σπουδαίως συνέστακέ [με] ὡς συγγενῆ σου; ‘he recommended⁵¹ me zealously and eagerly as your kinsman’).

49. White, *Light*, pp. 182-83.

50. White, *Light*, p. 182.

51. That Gemellus uses a perfect tense-form (stative aspect) here for his introduction functions to emphasize this recommendation to his reader (cf. Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* [2nd ed.; BLG, 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994], p. 21). Considering the two adverbials ἀνόκνωσ and σπουδαίως, Gemellus shows how grateful he is in being recommended.

This introduction and the recommendation by his brother helped Gemellus immensely, and the effects from it caused him to write this thank-you note.

As far as rhetoric goes, the letter is full of positive language, as Gemellus is extremely thankful for the recommendation of his brother Apollinarius. The immense gratitude that is characteristic of this letter (e.g. *χάρις σοι πλείστη*; ‘very many thanks to you’) at the beginning of the letter may indicate the severity of the dilemma Gemellus was facing.

Having reconstructed the story behind this letter, it may be more appropriate to label this as a thank-you letter for a letter of recommendation. The letter of recommendation itself seems to have been persuasive and convincing enough for the problem to have been resolved. However, it is interesting to note that when Gemellus refers to the previous letter that his brother wrote him, it is called *ἡ σύστασις*.

*Aurelius Archelaus to Julius Domitius (P.Oxy. I 32; 2 CE)*⁵²

This letter is in Latin rather than in Greek, and Deissmann labels the language as ‘vulgar Latin’, similar to the language found in the Muratorian Fragment.⁵³ The second half of the document is heavily mutilated, but the extant text is helpful enough to reconstruct a story. There are three characters in this story: Archelaus, the writer of the letter and narrator, Domitius, the recipient and Theon, the subject of the recommendation. Archelaus entitles himself as *beneficarius* or benefactor, probably of Theon. Domitius is called the military tribune of the legion (*tribvno militvm legionis*) on the verso of the letter, which contains the address. Theon, then, apparently is joining, or attempting to join, the ranks of Domitius, and Archelaus sends a letter of recommendation to him for his success.

Deissmann observes that some scholars consider this to be a Christian letter of sorts, or at least written by a Christian, due to similarities in language with the biblical text. For example, Archelaus writes: *reliquit enim suos et rem suam et actum et me secutus est* (‘for he left his own people, his goods and business, and followed me’).⁵⁴ However, along with Deissmann, I am not convinced that similarity in

52. Deissmann, *Light*, pp. 197-200.

53. Deissmann, *Light*, p. 197.

54. Cf. Mt. 19.27; Mk 10.28; Lk. 18.28. Translation is taken from Deissmann, *Light*, p. 198.

language necessitates conscious allusion. ‘If Archelaus were a Christian’, writes Deissmann, ‘it is extremely unlikely, I think, that he would have profaned St Peter’s words by applying them to the relations of an ordinary human friendship.’⁵⁵ Instead, he proposes that these words were ‘one of the stock phrases in ancient letters of recommendation’.⁵⁶ Whether or not this is true is yet to be determined, but it appears that those scholars who advocate for some type of Christian allusion may be making too much of the similarity of language here. All Archelaus seems to mean is that Theon is a dedicated fellow and therefore commends him to Domitius’s service. It appears, perhaps, that Theon is applying to be within military service under the ranks of Domitius, and Archelaus may be providing a professional recommendation here.

Rhetorically, there is much positive persuasion and convincing by Archelaus for Theon. He writes regarding him: *pristine commendaueram Theonem amicum meum* (‘I have recommended to you Theon, my friend’). He commends (*commendaueram*) his friend to Domitius, and describes his character as a dedicated and loyal follower in the letter. There is no evidence of hesitation on the part of Archelaus.

*Heracles to Musaeus (P.Herm. 1; 1 CE)*⁵⁷

This letter is a good example of a conventional letter of recommendation,⁵⁸ but perhaps a bit too generic. It is short and to the point, and does not contain too many details; because of this, reconstructing a story may be more challenging here. The writer of the letter (and narrator of the story) is Heracles, who writes to his dear friend (τῷ φιλατάτῳ) Musaeus. The subject of the recommendation is Dioscorus, whom Heracles ‘asks to have recommended’ (ἔρωτῶ σε συνεσταμμένον ἔχειν). Dioscorus is also the courier of the letter. All we can decipher about Musaeus is that he seems to have a close friendship with Heracles, or at least, that he is loved by Heracles (if the relationship is only one-sided).

The setting and plot are minimal in this letter. Heracles and Musaeus seem to be close friends, and Dioscorus seems to be a good friend of Heracles. Dioscorus may be travelling to wherever Musaeus is and may

55. Deissmann, *Light*, p. 199.

56. Deissmann, *Light*, p. 200.

57. Kim, *Form and Structure*, p. 204.

58. Kim, *Form and Structure*, p. 204.

be in need of something simple, such as housing, business connections or both. Whatever the case may be, Heracles does not specify the nature of Dioscorus's need, and simply recommends him without reservation or qualification. Perhaps the need is not yet known by Heracles, so the letter is preparatory for whatever need may arise when traveling; this may explain the lack of a specific request.

The rhetoric is positive, and Heracles appeals to his friendship (τῶι φιλατάτῳ) with Musaeus in the letter, and appeals again on the verso, where the addressee is Μουσαίῳ τῷ φίλτ[άτῳ]. Furthermore, Heracles' reason for Musaeus to accept his recommendation of Dioscorus is that Dioscorus is also a 'very good friend of mine'⁵⁹ (ἔστιν μου λείαν ἀναγκαῖος φίλος). His friendship with this man should be good enough reason to accept him as his own friend. So although this is a minimal and generic letter of recommendation, we see that the basis for accepting his recommendation is in the previously-held friendship (with Musaeus) and presently-held friendship (with Dioscorus) that Heracles had.

*Leon to Elders and Deacons (P.Oxy. VIII 1162; IV CE)*⁶⁰

This is one of the several Christian letters of recommendation in the documentary papyri. Leon is an elder (πρεσβύτερος) who writes to a group of elders and deacons in the local area. Specific names are not mentioned regarding the elders/deacons, but it appears that this is addressed to a particular group in one local congregation. The reason for concluding this is that Leon sends Ammonius to them; and it makes sense, rather than considering Ammonius to go to multiple places, that he travels simply to one place. This is then a third character that has been mentioned, Ammonius, who is to meet these elders and deacons soon. This letter is not a request by Ammonius seeking a favor but a request by Leon to make Ammonius known to them as well as to make known his association with Leon. Thus, Leon must be an elder in the community of good repute, and he sends Ammonius to this group, which also should be considered a group of good repute.

The plot of this story, although the letter is somewhat short, may be reconstructed in the following manner: Leon, an elder, recommends Ammonius to a group of elders and deacons in a local congregation. Although Leon does not use the word συνίστημι in his letter—he simply

59. Stowers, *Letter Writing*, p. 156.

60. Kim, *Form and Structure*, p. 231.

states συνδέξασθαι αὐτὸν ('receive him')—the concept seems to be so closely related to a recommendation that it may appropriately be called a letter of recommendation. In any case, Leon's reason for recommending Ammonius is not explicitly stated; but on the basis of an elder recommending a person to another group of elders and deacons, it may be appropriately assumed that Ammonius is either joining this group to train as an elder/deacon, to assist them (so already an elder/deacon) or to be there for some other similar reason. Kim states that this is a letter from a 'priest' (he interprets πρεσβύτερος as priest) 'commending a brother-Christian to the good offices of the priests and deacons of a local church'.⁶¹ Leon, who has presumably spent a good enough amount of time with Ammonius, vouches for him that he should be received 'in peace' (ἐν εἰρήνῃ [*sic*]). The setting of this story relates to the Christian churches in the local area, and this is clearly an ecclesial letter between elders/deacons.

The rhetoric here is positive again. He appeals to the recipients of the letter by calling them 'beloved brothers in the Lord God' (ἀγαπητοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ἐν κυρίῳ θεῷ), wishing them to 'rejoice greatly' (χαρᾶ χαίρειν) and 'to pray for their health in the Lord God' (ἐρρῶσθαι ὑμᾶς εὐχομε ἐν κυρίῳ θεῷ). He also appeals to them on behalf of Ammonius by including him as 'our brother' (τὸν ἀδελφῶν ἡμῶν). By doing this, he appeals to the unity of faith that they share as 'brothers' in the Lord.

*Paul to Sarapion (P.Oxy. XXXI 2603; IV CE)*⁶²

Another Christian letter of recommendation is this letter written by Paul to Sarapion (this is a separate person from the previous letter examined above, which is dated to the first century). The structure of this letter is markedly different from the other letters examined above in a number of ways. First, the opening and greeting is reversed from the more conventional writer-to-recipient format. Paul opens with 'To my lord brother Sarapion, Paul' (τῷ κυρίῳ μου ἀδελφῷ Σαραπιωνι Παῦλος). This reversal of the conventional order is likely a sign of respect to the recipient.⁶³ But secondly, and more conspicuously, the lengthy greeting takes more than half of the letter itself. Paul, in a somewhat literary fashion, uses the metaphor of a mirror to compliment his recipients; in essence, he states that just like a man holding a mirror has no need for

61. Kim, *Form and Structure*, p. 231.

62. Kim, *Form and Structure*, p. 233.

63. Stowers, *Letter Writing*, p. 158.

someone to tell him how he looks, so his recipients do not need for anyone to tell them about the ‘affection and love’ (στοργήν καὶ ἀγάπην) he has for them. A third group of characters, ‘acquaintances’ (τῶν ἡμετέρων γνωρίμων τῶν σοι), who are coming to Sarapion, enters into the story. Two minor characters in the story are Ision and Nikolaos, who seem to have good reputation as faithful believers in the community.

The plot may be reconstructed as follows: Paul and Sarapion have a close religious affinity towards one another; both seem to be church leaders. Paul is sending a group of people to Sarapion, who are simply identified as brethren (ἀδελφοῦς). The purpose for this is uncertain, and there are not enough clues in the letter to determine this. However, this group is not considered to be ‘students’ (κατηχούμενοι), but it is associated with Ision and Nikolaos, who apparently have good reputation in the community as upstanding characters. The precise meaning of *κατηχούμενοι* is unclear, but since it is placed in juxtaposition with the elect (ἐκλέκτους), it may be the case that these are those who may not be fully convinced of the Christian faith but are still learning about it. So the group is a group of ‘elect’ believers who are mature in their faith, associated with Ision and Nikolaos, possibly trained under them, and are now being recommended to Sarapion.

The rhetoric is positive here as well. Paul boldly states: ‘If you do anything for them, you have done it for me’ (εἴ τι αὐτοῖς ποιεῖς ἐμοὶ ἐποίησας). He vouches for this Christian group and considers himself a part of them. He also recommends them (though not using the word *συνίστημι*), as he states: ‘If you can write to the others about them, do not hesitate’ (εἰ δύναντον σοὶ ἐστὶν τοῖς ἄλλοις γράψαι περὶ τούτων μὴ ὀκνήσεις). Not only is the subject worthy of reception, but they are worthy of recommending to others as well. So as it is evident in the majority of the letters I have examined here, the writer wholeheartedly recommends the subject to the recipient of the letter and uses positive rhetoric to ensure the subject’s reception.

There are countless other letters in the documentary papyri that can be examined—even many letters which have not been edited and published—but this sample should provide a sufficient understanding of the narrative worlds of the letter of recommendation.

Common Elements of Letters of Recommendation

As mentioned above, the current debate within epistolary theory and epistolography revolves around the structural elements of a Greek letter; some claim a three-part structure, some four and others five. But aside from the problem of structure, there is also the problem of taxonomy—the question of how many types of letters are found in the extant documentary papyri. Letters can be classified according to various criteria, including occasion, style, locale and identity of the sender and recipients, among others. Nevertheless, White claims it is possible to classify the ancient letters, since ‘there are identifiable Greek letters with fixed formal patterns and stereotyped phrases which constitute specific epistolary types. It will prove useful to illustrate some of these letters as a basis for talking more broadly about the purposes served by letter writing and about general formal features of letters.’⁶⁴ He classifies the letters into four broad groups: letters of introduction and recommendation, petitions, family letters and royal letters of diplomacy. While this is not the place to discuss all the various types of ancient letters, it seems to be generally agreed upon that the letter of recommendation was a distinct type of letter within the documentary papyri. It appears, additionally, that, while all letters of recommendation are letters of introduction, not all letters of introduction are letters of recommendation. The difference, it appears, is in motivation: recommendation seems to be introduction *plus* motivation, while introduction lacks a motivation by the sender. There seems to be more of a vested, personal interest in recommendation than in introduction.

What distinguishes a letter of recommendation from other types of letters (however many types there may be) are some identifiable features in the body of the letter of recommendation.⁶⁵ Some of these features include: (1) identification of the subject being recommended, (2) the sender’s request or recommendation and (3) a promise to fulfill a reciprocal favor.⁶⁶ Most of the letters examined above, if not all

64. White, ‘Ancient Greek Letters’, p. 88.

65. White does note, however, that the opening and closing of the letter of recommendation is similar to other types of ancient letters. Cf. White, ‘Ancient Greek Letters’, p. 89.

66. Kim, *Form and Structure*, p. 7; Keyes, ‘Greek Letter’, pp. 39-41; Stowers, *Letter Writing*, pp. 153-56; White, *Light*, p. 194; White, ‘Ancient Greek Letters’, pp. 89-90; see also Jeffrey T. Reed, *A Discourse Analysis of Philippians: Method*

(except Theon to his Brother Herakleides [*P.Oxy.* IV 746]), contain each of these elements. Generally speaking, the body of the ancient letter is the most fluid and unrestricted. But letters of recommendation can be identified by noting some common elements in the body of the letter. White, for example, notes a ‘combination of features’ that distinguishes it from other types of letters.⁶⁷ For one, the body typically begins by identifying the subject, namely the person being recommended. Second is the actual statement of recommendation by the sender (which is obviously the essential component of a letter of recommendation). And the third component is ‘the letter writer’s statement that he will be favored if the recipient assists the letter carrier and by the sender’s promise to repay the favor’.⁶⁸ However, if this is the structure of a letter of recommendation, then one of the letters examined above, Theon to his Brother Herakleides (*P.Oxy.* IV 746), cannot be considered as such, since it lacks the ‘favor’ component, as well as the positive rhetorical component.

Another element to consider when determining whether a letter is identified as a recommendation is the common use of the word *συνίστημι* in these letters. Of course, the mere presence of a word does not dictate letter-type, but if the subject is being ‘recommended’, then it is entirely appropriate to consider the letter as a recommendation. The word *συνίστημι* is found in Louw-Nida’s lexicon under the domain ‘communication’, and the sub-domain ‘recommend, propose’, and is given the following definition: ‘to indicate approval of a person or event, with the implication that others adopt the same attitude; to recommend’ (33.344).⁶⁹ Again, while the mere presence of a word should not necessitate attributing a letter to a certain category, the fact that a common word for recommending a person was *συνίστημι* is significant. However, some caution is in order because some consider

and Rhetoric in the Debate over Literary Integrity (JSNTSup, 136; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) p. 221. However, Keyes states that ‘while the letters of introduction do not slavishly adhere to any single formula, there is abundant evidence that traditional formulae, different from those found in the *τύποι*, did exist, and were generally used’ (Keyes, ‘Greek Letter’, p. 42).

67. White, ‘Ancient Greek Letters’, p. 89.

68. White, ‘Ancient Greek Letters’, pp. 89-90.

69. It must also be observed that the Louw-Nida lexicon places this word under two other domains: (a) ‘know’ (domain 28), under the sub-domain ‘well known, clearly shown, revealed’ (28.28-28.56); and (b) ‘whole, unite, part, divide’ (domain 63), under the sub-domain ‘unite’ (63.5-63.8).

Romans 16 as a separate letter from the rest of Romans—that is, as a type of letter of recommendation.⁷⁰ While this is a contentious issue regarding the unity of the epistle to the Romans,⁷¹ the statement that Paul makes at the beginning of ch. 16 is a good example of the use of *συνίστημι* in recommending someone. Paul writes:

I commend to you Phoebe our sister (*συνίστημι δὲ ὑμῖν Φοίβην τὴν ἀδελφὴν ἡμῶν*) ... so that you would receive her in the Lord (*ἵνα αὐτὴν προσδέξησθε ἐν κυρίῳ*) ... and stand by her (*καὶ παραστήτε αὐτῇ*) ... for she has been a helper of many, as well as myself (*καὶ γὰρ αὐτὴ προστάτις πολλῶν ἐγενήθη καὶ ἐμοῦ αὐτοῦ*) (Rom. 16.1-2).

Paul provides the commendation, the purpose of commendation and the reason why Phoebe should be received by the recipients of his letter. The vested interest of Paul is evidenced by the language he uses regarding Phoebe. She is also addressed as ‘our sister’, uniting the recipients along with the subject of the letter (the rhetorical part).

One final observation may be made from the examination of the letters of recommendation. The particular request is not always specified in the letter. In fact, in a majority of the cases, the writer of the letter simply vouches for the subject of the letter, as if whatever the need is should be fulfilled by the recipient of the letter. This is simply based on the closeness of the relationship that the writer and subject have towards each other, and the writer has enough confidence in the subject to recommend him/her regardless of the need. It is as if the need or request itself is secondary to the character of the person being recommended.

Based on the discussion of the letters examined above, it seems reasonable to conclude that an ancient letter of recommendation includes the following elements: identification of the subject being recommended, the sender’s request or recommendation and a promise to fulfill a reciprocal favor, all indicating a vested, personal interest by the sender/writer of the subject of the letter, and without needing to specify what the favor entails.

70. Deissmann, *Light*, pp. 234-35; Kim, *Form and Structure*, p. 120; cf. Keyes, ‘Greek Letter’, p. 35; Stowers, *Letter Writing*, p. 155.

71. Cf. Stanley E. Porter, *The Letter to the Romans: A Linguistic and Literary Commentary* (NTM, 37; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), pp. 20-23.

Implications for 2 Corinthians 3.1-3

Typically in New Testament studies, letters of recommendation are compared to Paul's epistle to Philemon,⁷² and rightly so, since it is a prime example of such a letter, even though it is actually lengthier than other letters of recommendation in the documentary papyri. Much less, however, has been written regarding Paul's statement to the Corinthians when he writes, ἡ ἐπιστολή [συστατικῶν] ἡμῶν ὑμεῖς ἐστε ('you yourselves are our letter [of recommendation]'). The major question is: what does Paul mean by calling the Corinthians his letter of recommendation? If we consider what the modern conception of a letter of recommendation looks like, does this mean that the Corinthians could speak of Paul's competency in preaching or communicating the gospel? It appears that the survey of some of the letters of recommendation in the Greco-Roman culture above help to elucidate what Paul means.

The Metaphor of the Letter of Recommendation

What I have done in my analysis of the section on the documentary papyri above is to reconstruct a basic storyline from each of the letters of recommendation, using a form of literary analysis based on Petersen and RDM. Some common elements in these letters include the writer telling the recipient of the validity of the character of the subject of the letter. There seems to be a vested personal interest in the recommendation, and the writer's reputation and word is at stake. In 2 Cor. 3.1-3 we have a brief reference to a letter of recommendation as a metaphor for the Corinthians,⁷³ with a much clearer storyline of the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians. It is the meaning of this metaphor that must be identified in order to understand Paul's relation to the Corinthian church.

Paul states in 2 Cor. 3.1-3:

Are we beginning to commend (συνιστάνειν) ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation (συστατικῶν ἐπιστολῶν) to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter [of recommendation], written on our hearts, to be known and read by everyone. And you show that you are a letter of Christ (ἐπιστολή Χριστοῦ) delivered by us...

72. Cf. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul*.

73. William Baird, 'Letters of Recommendation: A Study of 2 Cor 3:1-3', *JBL* 80.2 (1961), pp. 166-72 (169).

Here, Paul starts by asking the rhetorical question: are we beginning to commend ourselves again? He has just finished speaking about being the aroma of God, and affirming that he and his associates are not peddlers (οἱ κατηλεύοντες) of the gospel; out of sincerity (ἐξ εὐκρινίας) they preach the word of God. But rather than commending himself, he asserts that the Corinthians are a living letter of recommendation for Paul. He states, ‘You are our letter of recommendation’, and so he does not need to commend himself any longer. However, in the next verse, Paul states that the letter is of Christ (simply an anarthrous genitive, Χριστοῦ); some translations such as the NIV have ‘from Christ’ here, referring to Christ having written the letter. William Baird summarizes the meaning of the metaphor in the following way:⁷⁴ Paul views himself as the courier of the letter. Correspondingly, he is also the subject of the letter. The phrase διακονηῖσα ὑφ’ ἡμῶν in v. 3 does not refer to Paul’s ‘ministry’ of the gospel but generally to his ‘service’, or more specifically, to his delivery of the letter. Since Paul is the courier as well as the subject of the letter, he is not the writer of the letter. Instead, Christ is the writer of this letter of recommendation. Consequently, the Corinthian community is the letter of recommendation, written on Paul’s heart for all to read. The recipients of the letter, then, are ‘all’. Considering the elements of a letter of recommendation, this explanation seems to fit the metaphor the best.

In summary, Christ, in sending Paul to the world, sends a letter of recommendation to his destination, which was customary in those days; Christ validates Paul and communicates his approval of Paul recommending him to the world. The letter that Paul carries with him is the Corinthian church herself. For the world to validate Paul and his ministry, they only need to look at the Corinthians and ‘read’ them, not on a piece of papyrus but on their hearts. Baird provides an insightful observation:

It seems evident that in II Cor 3 1-3a, Paul is employing the figure of the Greek epistle of introduction with a high degree of accuracy and consistency. He needs no literal letter of recommendation to or from any church. He has a figurative epistle whose content is the Christians of Corinth. That letter is written by Christ. It recommends its courier, Paul, to all men as an authorized minister of the gospel of God.⁷⁵

74. Baird, ‘Letters of Recommendation’, pp. 169-71.

75. Baird, ‘Letters of Recommendation’, p. 170.

Reconstruction of the Letter of Recommendation

The metaphor that Paul uses is the letter of recommendation, which in most cases communicates a vested interest and personal voucher for the person being recommended. The Corinthian congregation is symbolized as this letter of recommendation, which the ‘nations’ would simply have to ‘read’ in order to realize that Paul is a legitimate representative of Christ (the writer). Based on this analysis, here is what the metaphoric letter of recommendation might actually look like:

Christ, to the nations, grace and peace to you. I commend to you Paul, our brother and friend, whom I love deeply and regard as my ambassador. When he arrives, receive him as your own and accept any and every word he has for you. By receiving him, you receive me. I send you my deepest regards and wish you good health. Goodbye.

Conclusion

It is easy to read modern conceptions into ancient texts, and 2 Cor. 3.1-3 is no exception. Letters of recommendation today are restricted to the professional and academic spheres of modern life and used for the objective of attaining a job or entering into an academic program. But ancient letters of recommendation were not as *professionally* motivated as they were *socially* motivated. That understanding is more significant than most may realize. The letter of recommendation indicated a personal, vested interest of the writer in the subject of the letter, and this personal interest was communicated to a third party for the general benefit of the subject.⁷⁶ It was not merely ‘this person has the ability to do what is required’, but it was ‘I personally vouch for this person for whatever needs they may have’.

So when Paul states that the Corinthian believers are a letter of recommendation written on their hearts by Christ, he is stating that Christ has a vested, personal interest in Paul as the subject and courier of the letter, and that by looking at (or reading) the Corinthian community, the world should receive Paul as Christ’s messenger. It is not simply that Paul has a letter of recommendation to fulfill his job application to be an apostle. According to this metaphor, it is Christ

76. Cf. Peter Arzt-Grabner, *2. Korinther* (PKNT, 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), pp. 270-76, who writes on the vested interest of the referrer towards the reference.

recommending Paul as an apostle to the world, but this is more than merely his job as an apostle—Christ has personally invested himself in Paul and put his own reputation on the line for him, and the Corinthian community was proof that Paul was a valid apostle of Christ.