

The genre of letter (epistle)

Just as with music, movies, and any kind of art, the Bible was written in different literary forms. This means that every book in the Bible has some sort of “genre.” One of the keys to understanding any book of the Bible is to identify its particular genre, and then learn the best way to read that genre. The biblical genre of letter (epistle) is probably the most similar genre to what we read in our modern times. Here are some key distinctions of the biblical genre of letter:

- Letters were legitimate substitutions for a personal visit, and so receiving a letter would be a big deal to that community.
- Letters were to be read out loud, as most people were illiterate, and would need to hear what was written.
- Paul did not invent letters, as they existed all over the Greek and Roman world. Ancient letters typically followed a specific form, which includes: opening, body, closing. If an author wanted to make a point, he would often change the form of the letter (i.e., remove/expand the thanksgiving portion of the opening if he was angry/excited to speak to the audience).
- Reading a letter is only hearing one end of the telephone conversation, as we’re not always aware of previous communication that occurred between the writer and recipient. Because of this, we need to be careful in how we draw conclusions to things that aren’t explicitly stated.