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### Letters and letter writing

Peter Arzt-Grabner, *Letters and letter writing*. Papyri and the New Testament, 2. Leiden: Brill, 2023. Pp. xxx, 455. ISBN 9783506790484.

### Review by

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One of the key insights obtained by Adolf Deissmann around the turn of the twentieth century was that the papyri from Egypt show significant similarities with the New Testament, for example in representing what is usually referred to as “common Greek”<sup>[1]</sup>. In this book, Peter Arzt-Grabner shows us not only how far the similarities go between letters on Egyptian papyri and the epistles in the New Testament, but also where they differ.

The book opens with a preface, a list of abbreviations, and a letter-like *Dear reader* address. Arzt-Grabner’s passion for papyri becomes immediately apparent here as he shares his longstanding fascination for Egyptian papyri, the people in the papyri, and the links between the papyri and the New Testament epistles (in particular those of Paul). He also describes what makes ancient letter writing similar to and distinct from ‘letter writing’ today (e.g., how we start and end text messages or why we continue to read them), raising questions that he addresses later in the book. The contents of the book can be divided into three parts. In each, Arzt-Grabner describes the evidence from the papyri extensively before comparing it, where possible, with the evidence from New Testament epistles: the first part (pp. 1–65, chapters 1 to 4) discusses the large variety of letter types and writers; the second part (pp. 67–201, chapters 5 and 6) analyses the different sections of letters and the formulas and clichés found in them as well as the transport and reception of letters; and the third part (pp. 203–427, chapters 7 and 8) offers a brief conclusion and large corpus of translated and annotated letters adduced as evidence for the analyses in the previous chapters. In what follows, I review the major points made in each part before assessing the overall value of the book.

The first part analyzes the variety of letter types and writers. Arzt-Grabner first discusses how long or short letters may be and how their authors’ educational levels range from low to high, as shown, for example, by how letter writers mix business with private content or literary with non-literary content. He pays particular attention to two important issues in dealing with the letters on papyri, the fact that we often possess only half of a full ‘conversation’ and the fact that modern classifications of letter types fail to succinctly distinguish all letters from each other. Next, Arzt-Grabner illustrates the large range of identities that the letter writer(s) may assume in the papyri, such as that of scribe or of multiple senders. This is also where he points out parallels in Tertius as Paul’s writer and the role of co-senders in 1 Cor, 2 Cor, Gal, Col, and Phlm.

The book’s second part presents the bulk of the comparative analysis, which focuses specifically on formulas and clichés in the opening, middle, and concluding parts of the letter body. As explained in the introduction, Arzt-Grabner starts every subsection with a list of relevant foundational bibliography, which, though not aiming to be exhaustive, allows readers to dive deeper into the topic at hand. On the one hand, he manages to lay bare a large range of intriguing

connections between the formulas and clichés found in the New Testament epistles (esp. those of Paul) and the letters on Egyptian papyri, such as (i) the use of metaphorical forms of address such as ‘brother’, (ii) the use of multiple addressees, (iii) evaluative comments on astonishing behaviour by the addressee, (iv) the use of attenuating expressions such as performatives or vision imperatives for requests and commands, or (v) the use of secondary greetings at the close of the letter. On the other hand, the comparative analysis also clearly illustrates distinct differences between the language of the New Testament and the letters on Egyptian papyri: (i) the lack of formatting divisions in the New Testament, (ii) Paul’s innovative χάρις greeting instead of an expected infinitival χαίρειν greeting as in the papyri, (iii) the lack of health wishes so common in the papyri, (iv) Paul’s religious thanksgiving versus those documented in papyri, and (v) the lack of ethical instructions in papyri as we find them in the New Testament. Though the author is keen to provide (partial) parallels (or at the very least interpretative contextual information), the results of the comparisons in my view often also reveal in which specific ways the New Testament letters are not entirely the same as those found on papyri. Although this may seem a minor point, I would argue that this could be a more important step forward for the specific target audience of this book. After all, some of the parallels are to be expected as the result of the different types of communication people may engage in outside the context of letter writing as well, such as multiple speakers or addressees or in-group communication (cf. the in-group address form ‘brother’). Similarly, the use of attenuating expressions such as performatives or vision imperatives for requests and commands does not seem to reflect similarities between letters on papyri and the New Testament, but instead the pragmatic devices that speakers of ancient Greek simply would use.<sup>[2]</sup> In fact, at some points supposed parallels may become somewhat tenuous, such as what Arzt-Grabner calls ‘prayer reports’. The label suggests a clear link of the religious context of the New Testament with many of the papyri, but the examples with εὔχομαι can simply mean ‘I wish’, which would largely void such a link.

In the last part of the book, Arzt-Grabner briefly summarizes the main findings before offering a richly annotated set of papyri in translation that serve to further contextualize contemporary letter writing. Besides new suggestions on the (in)authenticity of Pauline letters based on formulae, he summarizes his results by concluding that the papyri offer much more comparative material with which we can interpret the language of the New Testament, especially when we want to interpret the form and intent of a formula in a New Testament letter. The annotated papyri that follow provide a rich resource, not only because of the translations into English but also due to Arzt-Grabner’s many detailed comments, e.g. on the sections of the letters, specific motifs, or phrases.

Despite some of my reservations with regard to the significance of certain parallels, this book serves as a solid resource for possible links between ancient letter writing and the New Testament. The main strength of the book resides in Arzt-Grabner’s ability to connect two fields which he shows to be more intimately connected than commonly assumed. As such, it is a welcome contribution to a growing subfield that seeks to connect papyrological and New Testament scholarship (cf. the series *Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament* or *Papyri and the New Testament*, in which the book appears). The presence of bibliographies for specific subtopics, translations into English, and several indexes strengthen the usability of this book as a sourcebook on this topic.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Notes

[1] See G. A. Deissmann, 1903. *Bible Studies: Contributions Chiefly from Papyri and Inscriptions to the History of the Language, the Literature, and the Religion of Hellenistic Judaism and Primitive*

*Christianity*. 2nd ed.; Deissman, 1927. *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*.

[2] For markers of politeness, see L. Unceta Gómez and Ł. Berger (eds.) 2022. *Politeness in Ancient Greek and Latin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [reviewed here] and for the development of politeness functions by visual imperatives in Post-classical Greek, see E. la Roi, E. forthc. The Intersubjectification of Vision as Interactional Thought: Vision Imperatives in Ancient Greek Diachrony. *Verbs of Thought and Speech: Pragmaticalization Paths across Languages*, ed. A. Pardal. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

[3] There is unfortunately no Greek index, which is in line with the relatively low amount of Ancient Greek quoted in the book.

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