



# ROSE GUIDE TO THE EPISTLES

Romans to Revelation



ROSE GUIDE TO THE  
**EPISTLES**

Rose Guide to the Epistles  
©2022 Rose Publishing

Published by Rose Publishing  
An imprint of Tyndale House Ministries  
Carol Stream, Illinois  
www.hendricksonrose.com

ISBN 978-1-64938-022-7

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Chapter six: *The Seven Churches of Revelation* (Rose Publishing, 2015); chapter seven: *Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Rose Publishing, 2009); “Why Did the Epistles Become Part of the New Testament?” adapted from *The Gospels: “Lost” & Found* by Timothy Paul Jones (Rose Publishing, 2007).

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Printed in the United States of America  
010722VP

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Epistles: An Overview



Christians began writing letters to churches from the earliest days of Christianity. The newly planted congregations needed to know more about who Jesus was, especially since the four gospels about the life of Jesus were not written until the latter half of the first century. These letters were essential for instruction about what it meant to live out the Christian faith. Collected and grouped together in our Bible today, these letters are what we call the New Testament Epistles.

The word *epistle* comes from the Greek word *epistole*, which simply means “message, commission, or letter.” The New Testament Epistles were sent to diverse and growing churches in the Mediterranean world and were written to address specific issues the churches faced. So when we read these epistles today, it is very literally reading someone else’s mail.

Though penned two thousand years ago, these letters tackle topics that are still pressing issues for believers today: church diversity, holy living, false doctrines, ministry leadership, persecution, and how to find hope in the future return of Christ Jesus.

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## THE EPISTLE GENRE

The Bible has many different types of writings within its pages. Some of it is poetry, like the musical lyrics in the Psalms. Some writings are historical, like the epic narratives of Moses and the exodus, and others are wisdom literature, like the proverbs of wise King Solomon. Categories such as these are called *genre*. Much like we would sort music into categories of pop, rock, jazz, classical, or country, the books of the Bible can be sorted according to their genres.

Twenty-one of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament fit the ancient genre of epistle. This epistle genre is not a one-size-fits-all. In fact, some ancient sources list anywhere from twenty-one to forty-one different types of epistles. Although the New Testament Epistles do not follow any of these types exactly, the genre can take on various forms and does so in the New Testament.

## WHO WROTE THE EPISTLES?

### Paul

Of all the epistle authors, the apostle Paul stands out. His writings make up nearly half of the New Testament, which has led some historians to regard Paul not merely as a great writer of Scripture but also as one of the great letter writers in history. Thirteen of the twenty-one epistles were written by Paul.

The various roles Paul takes on in the book of Acts and in his epistles is quite staggering. We see him as a pastor, church planter, missionary, teacher, and in some cases, like a mother or father (see for example, 1 Cor. 4:17; Gal. 4:19–20; 1 Thess. 2:7–8; 2 Thess. 2:15–16). Paul’s ministry was rich in character and broad in its reach, which makes sense if we consider his ministry philosophy of becoming “all things to all people so that by all possible means [he] might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).



*Peter and Paul by Guido Reni*

What we know of Paul’s life comes from Luke’s writings in the book of Acts, where we find Paul’s conversion story on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) and the extensive narratives of his missionary journeys (Acts 13–28). We also have a window into Paul’s life when he mentions things about himself in his epistles, specifically Galatians 1:11–24 (he explains his prior status as a zealous persecutor of Christians) and Philippians 3:3–6 (his travels immediately after his conversion to Christianity).

### Peter

Peter was one of Jesus’ original twelve disciples, an eyewitness to the ministry of Christ. He became the most prominent leader of the early and rapidly growing church (see Acts 2). Information about Peter’s life comes mostly from the first five books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts.



His two back-to-back epistles (1 and 2 Peter) were written late in his life, about thirty years after Christ. It is believed that not long after writing these letters, he was martyred in Rome under Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians.

## John

Like Peter, John was one of the original twelve disciples and an eyewitness of Christ. John was a prolific writer, penning the gospel that bears his



John the Evangelist

name, the apocalyptic book of Revelation, and three epistles. While the gospel of John and Revelation are lengthy, the epistles of 1, 2, and 3 John are among the shortest books of the Bible.

Though John is not featured in the book of Acts as much as Peter or Paul, he nonetheless emerged as an important leader of the early church (see Acts 3–4). We learn about John's life from the Gospels, Acts, his letters, and the writings of other early church leaders such as Irenaeus and Polycarp. John is believed

to have lived the longest of any of the twelve apostles, and he wrote his books late in his life. According to tradition, John died of natural causes in Ephesus near the end of the first century.

## Other Writers

- ✠ Two of the epistles are believed to have been written by Jesus' brothers James and Jude.
- ✠ In four of Paul's epistles, he identifies Timothy, his fellow missionary traveler, as also sending the letter and possibly co-authoring them since Paul sometimes uses "we" instead of "I" in these letters (Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1).
- ✠ Hebrews stands out as the only entirely anonymous letter. Various theories of its authorship have been proposed—Paul, Apollos, or Priscilla—but there are not enough clues in the letter to determine with any certainty who authored it.

## Secretaries

Following a known Greco-Roman practice of using a secretary for writing, called an *amanuensis*, the New Testament authors often utilized individuals to compose their epistles. Paul is most known for using a secretary. At the end of the epistle to the Romans, Tertius identifies himself as the secretary of the letter: “I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord” (Rom. 16:22). Sometimes Paul would add his autograph: “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand” (1 Cor. 16:21; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; Philem. 1:19). The freedom that Paul gave his secretary is debated, but the common way a secretary operated involved a degree of creative freedom. Secretaries would take notes of dictation and at times edit them; in other circumstances the secretaries were simply instructed to write about certain themes. Such freedom may be a reason why Paul appears to express himself in diverse ways throughout his letter-writing career.

Peter is also known to have used a secretary (1 Peter 5:12), and in some ways Mark was Peter’s secretary when writing the gospel of Mark. The early church father Papias was told by the apostle John that Mark received anecdotes of the life of Jesus from Peter and edited them into a coherent order.



John dictates the book of Revelation to his secretary (Cave of the Apocalypse, Patmos)

## HOW ARE THE EPISTLES ARRANGED?

Most church traditions have arranged the New Testament Epistles into three basic groups. Open your Bible and right after the book of Acts you will find the epistles written by Paul to various churches, followed by Paul's epistles to individuals, and then comes what are called the General Epistles, which are all the epistles *not* written by Paul. The epistles in these categories are arranged, more or less, by size, with the longer letters first and shorter ones near the end.

### Paul's Epistles to Churches

This first category includes the first nine epistles in the New Testament. These letters were written to churches for specific reasons. The letters are named after the congregations who received them, and they include Paul's letter to the Romans, his first and second letter to the Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and the two letters to the Thessalonians. Romans and 1 Corinthians are Paul's longest epistles.

### Paul's Epistles to Individuals

The second category includes Paul's four letters written to particular people. These include Paul's first and second letter to Timothy, his disciple and a young pastor; his letter to Titus, also a pastor; and his letter to a church leader named Philemon. Much like the epistles addressed to whole church congregations, even Paul's letters to individuals seem to have public appeal because they were circulated to various churches. The two letters to Timothy and Titus are often group together and called the Pastoral Epistles, since Paul is writing advice to pastors.

### THE PRISON EPISTLES

The epistles of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are collectively called the Prison Epistles. Paul wrote these four letters around AD 60–62 from prison—or, more precisely, while guarded under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial (Acts 28:16, 30).

## General Epistles

The General Epistles include the final eight letters in the New Testament. They are as follows: Hebrews, written by an anonymous author; and then James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude—each named after their author. Hebrews is the longest epistle and 3 John the shortest, though Jude also is quite a short letter.

## Revelation

Revelation stands out as the most unique book of the New Testament. It is not a gospel—like Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John—nor does it fit the pattern of the epistles. However, it does begin like an epistle: “John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia” (Rev. 1:4). The first three chapters contain seven short letters to seven churches in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The book of Revelation, however, is written as apocalyptic literature. In this type of writing in the Bible, God’s hidden plans are revealed through visions, symbols, and images.

PAUL'S EPISTLES TO CHURCHES	PAUL'S EPISTLES TO INDIVIDUALS	GENERAL EPISTLES
Romans	1 Timothy	Hebrews
1 Corinthians	2 Timothy	James
2 Corinthians	Titus	1 Peter
Galatians	Philemon	2 Peter
Ephesians		1 John
Philippians		2 John
Colossians		3 John
1 Thessalonians		Jude
2 Thessalonians		

## WHAT IS IN AN EPISTLE?

Just like there are certain expectations for how we should write a formal letter or email today, there were general expectations in the first century for how an epistle should be written. The New Testament Epistles have a basic structure of six components, though there are always exceptions to the rule.

### 1. Firstly, the author identifies himself.

In fact, the first word in all of Paul's letters is his name. Likewise, James, Jude, and Peter in their epistles identify themselves right away. John, who can tend to stand outside of convention, does not identify himself in his first epistle and calls himself "the elder" in his other two epistles (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1). Hebrews is another exception to this rule, where the writer skips this part of an epistle entirely.

Along with the author's name, we sometimes find a claim to authority that would give him the right to send such a correspondence. Paul tends to be creative in his credentialing, calling himself "a prisoner of Christ" (Philem. 1:1) and "an apostle—sent ... by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal. 1:1). Similarly, Peter begins his first letter calling himself "an apostle of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:1).

#### SIX PARTS OF AN EPISTLE

1. Author
2. Recipient
3. Greeting
4. Body
5. Application
6. Closing Greetings



## 2. Next, the author identifies who he is writing to.

Paul often writes to believers in a particular city, as in his letter to the Colossians: “To God’s holy people in Colossae” (Col. 1:2). But in other cases the letter is for several churches in a region, for example, “to the churches in Galatia” (Gal. 1:2). These were circular letters and were meant to travel the circuit, so to speak, being read to multiple congregations. Paul’s shortest epistle is a personal appeal specifically addressed firstly “to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker,” and then “also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier”—possibly members of Philemon’s household (Philem. 1:1–2). James, interestingly, addresses his letter “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations,” probably an allusion to Jewish Christians living outside Israel (James 1:1).

## 3. The author then gives a greeting.

The greeting may be quite general, though theologically rich, like we see in Galatians:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

GALATIANS 1:3–5

It can be a single word, as seen in James:

“Greetings.”

JAMES 1:1

But it can also be deeply personal and lengthy, like how Paul begins 2 Corinthians:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we

are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3–7

Hebrews again breaks the pattern and lacks a greeting.

#### **4. Next, the author embarks upon the body of the letter.**

In this main section of the letter, the author may simply begin by jumping right into the reason, or occasion, for writing the letter. This is what Paul does in Galatians:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you.

GALATIANS 1:6

However, in many letters there is thanksgiving, such as 1 Corinthians 1:4–9, or a beautiful first chapter such as in Ephesians about being chosen and blessed by the Lord.

#### **5. Then, the author applies his teaching.**

Here, the author gives practical guidance to his readers about how to live in light of the teaching. We have one of the best examples of this in James's epistle, where he tells his audience that faith without works is dead faith (chapters 1–2) and then goes on to instruct his readers in some very specific ways to test their faith by their actions (chapters 3–5).

#### **6. Lastly, the author gives his closing greetings.**

In an epistle's conclusion, we can find exhortations, a benediction, or a list of people the author wants to point out for their special contribution to the ministry. At the end of Romans, for example, Paul lists over twenty-five individuals and the roles they played in his ministry (Rom. 16:1–16).



## WHEN WERE THE EPISTLES WRITTEN?

The New Testament letters appear as early as the late AD 40s, about two decades after Jesus, and span to the twilight of the first century. A critical mass of the letters appears in the AD 60s, including many of Paul's letters, Peter's two letters, and possibly Hebrews. The New Testament letters are our earliest witnesses to the movement of the gospel in the early church.

The epistles are dated by historical markers found in them: names, places, and information about the authors. Sometimes we can corroborate things said in epistles with the narrative in the book of Acts, such as is the case with Paul's travels and imprisonments. For example, we can track down Priscilla and Aquila, who are mentioned in Paul's epistles, in the story in Acts 18 (Rom. 16:3; 2 Tim. 4:19; 1 Cor. 16:19).

The names and places mentioned in the epistles can give us a window into the history behind the letters. This reminds us that Christianity is a historical faith and can be confirmed by many witnesses who lived out their faith and ministered in the church much as Christians do today.



Church in Protaras, Cyprus



BOOK	AUTHOR	DATE	AUDIENCE
<b>ROMANS</b>	Paul	AD 57	Church in Rome
<b>1 CORINTHIANS</b>	Paul	AD 55–56	Church in Corinth
<b>2 CORINTHIANS</b>	Paul	AD 56	Church in Corinth
<b>GALATIANS</b>	Paul	AD 49	Churches in Galatia
<b>EPHESIANS</b>	Paul	AD 60–62	Church in Ephesus
<b>PHILIPPIANS</b>	Paul	AD 60–62	Church in Philippi
<b>COLOSSIANS</b>	Paul, with Timothy	AD 60–62	Church in Colossae
<b>1 THESSALONIANS</b>	Paul, with Silas and Timothy	AD 50–51	Church in Thessalonica
<b>2 THESSALONIANS</b>	Paul, with Silas and Timothy	AD 50–51	Church in Thessalonica
<b>1 TIMOTHY</b>	Paul	AD 62–66	Timothy
<b>2 TIMOTHY</b>	Paul	AD 66–67	Timothy

Dates shown give an estimated time frame in which the book was written.

DESTINATION	THEMES	NOTABLE
Rome	Universal guilt Justification by faith Godly living	Paul's most theologically packed letter
Corinth	The resurrection Practical Christian living	With Romans, one of Paul's longest letters
Corinth	Suffering New covenant Repentance and judgment	Paul's most personal and emotional letter
Galatia	One gospel Justification by faith Adoption	Possibly Paul's earliest epistle
Ephesus	Adoption New lives in Christ Unity	Similar to Romans in structure and topic, but shorter and more like a summary
Philippi	Partnership Humility Rejoicing	The Philippian church was the first church Paul founded in Europe.
Colossae	Christ's supremacy Alive in Christ A new mindset	Also intended to be read by the nearby church in Laodicea
Thessalonica	Encouragement Resurrection Second coming of Christ	Paul and Silas previously had been forced by a mob to leave Thessalonica.
Thessalonica	Second coming of Christ Diligence	Written about six months after 1 Thessalonians
Ephesus	False teaching Church leadership Godly living	In his epistles, Paul mentions Timothy more than any of his other coworkers.
Ephesus	Faithfulness God's Word	Paul's last epistle

Continued on the next page

BOOK	AUTHOR	DATE	AUDIENCE
<b>TITUS</b>	Paul	AD 64–66	Titus
<b>PHILEMON</b>	Paul, with Timothy	AD 60–62	Philemon
<b>HEBREWS</b>	Unknown	AD 60–69	Possibly Jewish Christians
<b>JAMES</b>	James	AD 49	Jewish Christians living outside of Israel
<b>1 PETER</b>	Peter, with Silas	AD 64	“God’s elect, exiles scattered” (v. 1)
<b>2 PETER</b>	Peter	AD 64	“Those who ... have received a faith” (v. 1)
<b>1 JOHN</b>	John	AD 85–95	Possibly the same seven churches in Revelation
<b>2 JOHN</b>	John	AD 85–95	“The lady chosen by God and to her children” (v. 1)
<b>3 JOHN</b>	John	AD 85–95	Gaius
<b>JUDE</b>	Jude	AD 60s–80s	“Those who have been called” (v. 1)
<b>REVELATION</b>	John	AD 90s	Seven churches in Asia Minor

DESTINATION	THEMES	NOTABLE
Crete	Church elders Teaching Sound doctrine Good works	Titus and 1 and 2 Timothy are Paul's three Pastoral Epistles.
Colossae	Reconciliation in Christ	Paul's shortest epistle; likely sent along with Colossians
Unknown	Superiority of Christ Perseverance	Written more like a sermon than a letter
Unknown	Faith and works Tests of faith	Possibly the earliest of the epistles
Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia Minor, Bithynia	Holiness Suffering	Written to regions all in modern-day Turkey
Possibly Asia Minor	Believers' calling False teachers Christ's return	Written shortly before Peter was martyred in Rome
Possibly Asia Minor	Relationship with God Love Christ's incarnation	Least structured epistle, with many themes blended throughout
Possibly Asia Minor	Love Truth	The "lady" may be a metaphor for "the church."
Possibly Asia Minor	Hospitality Good works	Shortest epistle—and shortest book in the Bible
Unknown	Judgment of false teachers Contending for the faith	Two of Jesus' brothers, James and Jude, wrote epistles.
Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea	Victory Hope	John received this revelation while exiled on the island of Patmos.



## WHAT WAS THE WORLD OF THE EPISTLES LIKE?

The epistles were written and read by people who lived in a setting characterized by three main cultures: Jewish, Greek, and Roman.

### Jewish Life

The Jewish life was lived in two general geographic places: the land of Israel and the Diaspora, or dispersion, which was anywhere outside Israel. A Jewish family living in the Diaspora lived among gentiles in pagan cities, which meant an intensely Greek culture. The Diaspora Jews could not live solely Jewish lives, religiously or culturally, since society insisted that they conform to a gentile way of doing commerce, religion, and politics. A Jewish family in the land of Israel was less likely to face the pressure of Greek culture since Jews were the majority. They were free to speak in Hebrew or Aramaic, unlike their Diaspora sisters and brothers who were likely required to speak Greek.

A hard line cannot be drawn between these two contexts since Greek culture did influence the language and thinking in the land of Israel as well, as we can see from some of the Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures. Likewise, we notice that some gentiles in the Diaspora converted to Judaism—called God-fearers or proselytes (see, for example, Acts 10:2, 22). This indicates that these two cultures commingled and influenced each other. Though Jews in the first century were far too diverse to boil down to simple characteristics, they still had a clear commitment to the heritage of the patriarchs, the Holy Scriptures, community, family life, and gathering for worship.

### Greek Culture

Most of the New Testament Epistles were written to believers who lived in the Diaspora where the culture was largely Greek. This is the “Greco” part of the Greco-Roman world of the first century.

Greek influence, or what we would call Hellenization, can be seen both in language and day-to-day living. Since Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC had dominated the lands from Greece and Egypt to all the way to the current borders of China, the world of the New Testament

in the first century AD was thoroughly Hellenized. In each of the lands Alexander conquered, everything from commerce to medicine, literature to religion, philosophy to fashion was influenced by the Greek way of life. Long after Alexander's death, the world remained Greek in culture, even under Roman rule.

Greek became the language of commerce, so by the first century, it took on a basic form called Koine Greek, or "common" Greek. Much like how English is used in many parts of the world today, if you wanted to trade or communicate in New Testament times, you used Greek. The New Testament Epistles were composed in Koine Greek.

## The Roman Empire

The world of the New Testament was ruled by the Roman Empire through a system of governors and kings. Rome established their rule over the Mediterranean world by what they called the "Peace of Rome," or *Pax Romana*. Closely tied to Caesar Augustus, the Peace of Rome guaranteed provinces under Roman rule a level of stability and privilege. It also provided citizenship to some people, so long as they did not cause the Roman government any trouble. (Paul's Roman citizenship was especially important to him when it granted him freedom from prison and a direct appeal to Caesar; Acts 16:38; 22:25–27.)



Ara Pacis Augustae in Rome



The Romans carried on the Hellenistic culture of the previous rulers, but they put their own twist on things. They expected a tribute to Caesar to be paid from each province, and, most difficult for early Christians, the Peace of Rome required emperor worship. Originally, the Peace of Rome was based on a cult related to a goddess called *Pax* (“Peace”) and her temple *Ara Pacis Augustae* or “Augustan Peace Altar.” While other cults existed, the *Pax* cult was promoted to official status by Emperor Augustus and resulted in full-blown emperor worship. This included public statues of Caesar to remind the provinces of Roman ideals and the divine claims of Caesar. Interestingly, *peace* is often highlighted in Paul’s letters with clear association with God, something which would have been understood as a challenge to Caesar’s divine rule (Rom. 15:33; 16:20; 1 Cor. 14:33; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:9).

## WHY DID THE EPISTLES BECOME PART OF THE NEW TESTAMENT?

Even while the New Testament books were being written, the words of people who saw and followed the risen Lord—specifically, the words and writings of the apostles—carried special authoritative weight in the churches (see for example, Acts 1:21–26; 15:6–16:5; 1 Cor. 4–5; 9:1–12; Gal. 1:1–12; 1 Thess. 5:26–27).

I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

2 PETER 3:2

But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold.

JUDE 1:17

Even well after the apostles’ deaths, Christians continued to cherish the testimony of these eyewitnesses and their close associates.

For a writing to be recognized as authoritative in churches throughout the Christian world, the writing had to be connected to an eyewitness of the



risen Lord and not to contradict other accepted writings about Jesus. Paul was an eyewitness of the risen Lord and became an apostle (Acts 26:16; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8–10). Other epistle writers, such as John, Peter, and James, were present with Jesus during his earthly ministry and became recognized as apostles. Early Christians rejected writings as authoritative that could not meet this criteria. For example, two texts that began circulating among Christians were the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. These writings were initially recognized but questioned by church leaders and eventually rejected. They were not accepted because both texts were written in the second century, well after the death of the apostle Peter, and some passages in the *Gospel of Peter* could be seen as suggesting that Jesus was not fully human, a teaching that would contradict other accepted New Testament books.

Although debates continued into the fourth century about a few writings, Christians universally agreed at least as early as the second century about the authority of nineteen New Testament books. Christians unanimously embraced the four Gospels, Acts, Paul’s letters, and first epistle of John. Other New Testament books, like some of the General Epistles, became undisputed and officially accepted later in the first few centuries.

### Early Lists of Authoritative Christian Writings

FRAGMENT OF MURATORI	CODEX CLAROMONTANUS	EUSEBIUS’S CHURCH HISTORY	LETTER OF ATHANASIUS
Mid 2 <sup>nd</sup> century	Late 3 <sup>rd</sup> century	Early 4 <sup>th</sup> century	AD 367
<p><i>Apocalypse of Peter</i> was recognized but questioned.</p> <p>Hebrews, James, and the letters of Peter are not mentioned.</p>	<p><i>Apocalypse of Peter</i> and several other texts were recognized but questioned.</p> <p>Hebrews may have been on the list of questioned books.</p>	<p>James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John were recognized but questioned.</p> <p><i>Apocalypse of Peter</i>, <i>Gospel of Peter</i>, and other texts were rejected.</p> <p>Revelation may have been on the list of questioned books.</p>	<p>All 27 books of the New Testament were accepted.</p> <p>No other texts were recognized or accepted.</p>

FRAGMENT OF MURATORI	CODEX CLAROMONTANUS	EUSEBIUS'S CHURCH HISTORY	LETTER OF ATHANASIUS
<b>Accepted Books:</b>	<b>Accepted Books:</b>	<b>Accepted Books:</b>	<b>Accepted Books:</b>
Matthew	Matthew	Matthew	Matthew
Mark	Mark	Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke	Luke	Luke
John	John	John	John
Acts	Acts	Acts	Acts
Romans	Romans	Romans	Romans
1 and 2 Corinthians	1 and 2 Corinthians	1 and 2 Corinthians	1 and 2 Corinthians
Galatians	Galatians	Galatians	Galatians
Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians
Philippians	Philippians	Philippians	Philippians
Colossians	Colossians	Colossians	Colossians
1 and 2 Thessalonians	1 and 2 Thessalonians	1 and 2 Thessalonians	1 and 2 Thessalonians
1 and 2 Timothy	1 and 2 Timothy	1 and 2 Timothy	1 and 2 Timothy
Titus	Titus	Titus	Titus
Philemon	Philemon	Philemon	Philemon
1 John	Hebrews	Hebrews	Hebrews
2 or 3 John (or both letters, counted as one)	James 1 and 2 Peter	1 Peter 1 John	James 1 and 2 Peter
Jude	1, 2, and 3 John	Revelation	1, 2, and 3 John
Revelation	Jude Revelation		Jude
			Revelation

## HOW SHOULD WE STUDY AN EPISTLE?

Much like you would not pick up and read a novel in the same exact way you would a newsletter, we must also approach epistles in a different way than other genres of the Bible. Here are a few tips for how to study an epistle.

### 1. Identify the genre.

The first step in studying any book of the Bible is to determine what kind of writing it is: a narrative, a book of prophecy or poetry, or in our case, an epistle. It is helpful to also know which type of epistle it is; some epistles were written to a public audience or a church, while others were more private and addressed to an individual.

### 2. Determine the occasion.

The most crucial step for interpreting an epistle is knowing that it was written for a specific occasion, even when the subject matter is broadly about the faith. In this sense, the epistles are *occasional*. This means that the writers, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote to a church, churches, or a person within a specific context with specific concerns, and the letter addresses all these things. Ask yourself, “Why is this letter being written?” This question gets to the heart of the letter’s occasion. It may be that the recipients need to be challenged, encouraged, reminded, taught, or corrected—or all the above.

Because the epistles are occasional, this means that when we read these letters two thousand years later, we cannot directly apply what the letter says to our circumstances today without first asking what it meant to those who received the letter. After we ask about the purpose and meaning of the letter to the original audience, then through careful study, we can begin to apply the content of the letter to ourselves and our churches now.

### 3. Observe the context.

Observing the context could mean asking who the author of the letter is and getting to know more about his credentials, which many writers declare in the first several lines of an epistle. Also, discovering what the author’s relationship might be with the recipients can draw out important

meaning. For example, some of Paul's letters sound intensely personal, like his correspondence with the Corinthian church or with Timothy, while others have a more distant association, like his letter to the Colossians, which mentions that Paul simply "heard of [their] faith" (Col. 1:4).

Additionally, we might want to find out who the recipients were beyond just the person's name or church location by looking for clues in the letter. For example, Peter wrote his first epistle to Christians who were facing intense persecution, as evidenced when he says, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you" (1 Peter 4:12) and "After you have suffered a little while, [God] will himself restore you and make you strong" (1 Peter 5:10).

#### **4. Find key themes, words, and structure.**

Knowing *what* is in an epistle helps us discover *why* the epistle was written. It can be helpful to identify repeated words or phrases, keeping an eye out for what is emphasized. Readers may also want to outline the epistle's structure to understand the logic and flow of the message. This can be fairly easy to do for a structured epistle like Colossians but more difficult for a free-flowing letter like 3 John.

#### **5. Compare with other epistles.**

Readers may want to go a step further and compare key themes and words from one letter to another. For example, some have found parallels between Romans and Ephesians, observing that Ephesians feels very much like a summarized version of Romans. By combining what Paul says about justification in Romans and Ephesians, we may arrive at a more robust theology about this doctrine. Comparing epistles and reading them in harmony can enrich our overall understanding of the message of Scripture.