

Lutz Doering, *Ancient Jewish Letters and the Beginnings of Christian Epistolography* (WUNT I/298; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2012). Pp. XIV+600. Cloth €129. ISBN 978-3-16-152236-9

### MARCIN KOWALSKI

Institute of Biblical Studies, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin  
e-mail: xmkowal@gmail.com

*Ancient Jewish Letters and the Beginnings of Christian Epistolography* by Lutz Doering (LD) is a continuation of the research carried out by the author after 2000 and an expansion of the previously published articles on the Epistle of Baruch, Catholic Epistles, and Qumran. The author, since 2014, is a professor of New Testament and Ancient Judaism in the Protestant Theological Faculty of WWU Münster and Academic Head of the Institutum Judaicum. The book contains ten chapters preceded by Preface and followed by Bibliography, Index of Passages, Index of Modern Authors, and Index of Subjects. Its extensive Bibliography (pp. 515-560) comprises positions in English, German, French, Italian, Netherlandish, and Hebrew.

Chapter 1, “Introduction” (pp. 1-27), points at the marginalization of Jewish letter writing in New Testament scholarship, which is the impulse for the present study. The author argues for at least three areas in which Jewish letter writing contributes specifically to our understanding of early Christian epistolography: 1) the standardized parts of the Greek letter (introduction and final greetings), 2) the text-pragmatic use of letters in addressing various communities, and 3) the reference to group identity, cohesion, and a common salvific history. LD discusses the studies of ancient Jewish letters from the nineteenth century on and explains the need for a new investigation which would pay attention to Jewish and Greek cross-influences, and to a cultural phenomenon of letter writing shaped by religious practices and conventions. After presenting the scope and structure of the present study, the author finishes chapter 1 with some theoretical assumptions regarding letters, like communicative and textual character of written correspondence, letters versus epistles, and theoretical model for epistolary communication.

Chapter 2, “Ancient Jewish Documentary Letters” (pp. 28-95), focuses first on Aramaic documentary letters from Elephantine by investigating on their formal and formulaic features (brother and sister terminology, *shalom*

greetings), letter topics (ritual purity, Passover, Sabbath, temple and sacrifices), and pragmatic functions. The letters from Elephantine served to handle religious, political, and diplomatic affairs, and to communicate with Persian authorities and co-religionists in Jerusalem and Judea. The author stresses their community-related function, important for the development of ancient Jewish and Christian epistolography. Subsequently, LD moves on to Aramaic ostrakon letters of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, documentary letters from Qumran and Jerusalem, letters from Masada and from the Bar Kohba War. The latter ones are scrutinized in a more detailed manner with attention paid to the themes, personae, and formal-formulaic features, which testify to the influence of the Aramaic letters of the time. The chapter finishes with a look at Greek documentary letters authored by Jews from Masada, Egypt, and Herakleopolis, which, on their turn, follow without exception the formulaic and stylistic conventions of Greek letter writing.

Chapter 3, “Letters in the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Scriptures” (pp. 96-169), deals with the role and reception of the letters present in the Hebrew Bible and in LXX. The author examines the biblical vocabulary for letters and oral messages in BH and in LXX, and presents succinctly the Hebrew (Former Prophets, Jer 29, Esther, Nehemiah, 2 Chronicles), Aramaic (Daniel 3–4 and 6, Ezra 4–7), and Greek (1–3 Maccabees, Esther, Epistle of Jeremiah, Baruch) epistolary corpora. LD eventually notices five areas of overlapping, development, and linguistic cross-fertilization between Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek epistolographic material: 1) the purposes of legitimization and documentation, 2) the filling of gaps in narrative, 3) the epistolary formulae bearing marks of resemantization and the epistolary proems emphasizing the common salvific history, 4) festal character, and 5) the function of letters as a macroform of authoritative writing, representing correspondence between Israel and Diaspora.

Chapter 4, “Literary Letters in the Dead Sea Scrolls” (pp. 170-214), analyzes first the letter embedded in a literary composition and said to be written down by Enoch, namely, 4Q203 frg. 8. Next, LD examines two literary macroforms: the “letter of Enoch” (found in two manuscripts, 4Q204 and 4Q212), and the letter of Darius (4Q559 frg. 1). The analyses enable the author to draw the conclusion that the letter form was well-established in the world of qumranic writers, and that there are some literary and pseudepigraphic letters in the Aramaic corpus (contra Fitzmyer). The two additional texts examined by LD are 4Q389 (apparent Jeremiah’s letter) and 4QMMT. The former testifies to the development of the Jeremiah tradition and the role of written communication in the Hebrew milieu of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE; the latter resembles Greek epistolary treatises as well as quasi-official Jewish and early Christian letters, thus anticipating some of the creativity with which Paul tailored his correspondence.

Chapter 5, “Letters in the Early Jewish Pseudepigrapha” (pp. 215-262), examines the *Letter of Aristeas*, fragment 2 of Eupolemus, the Epistle of Baruch, and the letters between Baruch and Jeremiah in *4 Baruch*. The Letter of Aristeas, despite the lack of epistolary formulaic framework, is labeled by the author as an epistolary treatise. Next, Salomon’s correspondence with Vaphres and Sauron, found in Eupolemus 2, serves in advancing the narrative and testifies to the creative connection of Greek epistolary proem with the scriptural eulogy. Further, the Epistle of Baruch (*2 Baruch* 78-86) builds on the tradition of Diaspora letters (cohesion of the people, its relation with God, and its future regathering; cf. *2 Macc* 1,1-10 and the Gamaliel letters) and stands close to New Testament literature. Finally, the letters in *4 Baruch*, in harmony with the Diaspora and New Testament letters, play the role of instruments of exhortation and convey hope of national restoration and individual resurrection.

Chapter 6, “Letters in Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus” (pp. 263-342), introduces the reader into the epistolary portions in Philo and Josephus. Letters play a rather marginal role in Philo, and in *Legatione ad Gaium* Philo seems to follow the four-part rhetorical disposition without preface or epistolary conclusion. On the other hand, embedded letters play an important role in Josephus who presents a vivid epistolary exchange between various public figures in Judea. According to the author, “Josephus translates Aramaic epistolarity into the idiom of the Greek letter and thus inserts it into a quasi-universal epistolary culture” (p. 342).

Chapter 7, “Early Rabbinic Letters” (pp. 343-376), explores the references to the letters by Tannaitic sages in Mishna and Tosefta, as well as their parallels in Amoraic literature. Tannaitic literature contains sparse mentions of quasi-official letters concerning administrative, juridical, halakhic, and calendrical issues. In Amoraic texts, on the other side, the references to letters and letter writers appear quite frequently, featuring an increased use of written correspondence between rabbis, or entire communities and sages exchanging information about legal cases. Among Amoraic rabbis and patriarchs, one also finds a letter type that is widely attested elsewhere: letters of recommendation. Eusebius, Jerome, Epiphanius and other Christian writers mention messengers (“apostles”) sent by Jewish patriarchs with encyclical letters which instruct on how to keep the Law. In the Jewish rabbinic texts, the network between the patriarchs and the Diaspora seems to be far-extended and based on the previous contacts and the exchange of letters between them.

Chapter 8, “Paul’s Letters in the Context of Jewish Letter Writing” (pp. 377-428), deals with the question of character and pragmatic use of Paul’s letters and the ways in which they may have been informed by Jewish epistolography. The quasi-official character of Paul’s letters moves beyond the spectrum of familial

letters, to address and strengthen the network of communities understood by Paul as *familia Dei*. The apostle takes letter writing to a level between the private and the public, which the author labels as “the inner public sphere” (the expression coined by D. Mendels). The apostle’s writings show some similarities to the pragmatic function of the letters by Ovid, the Cynic epistles, the philosophical letters by Epicurus, or the epistolary communication of associations, *collegia*, and *thiasoi*. The closest parallel to Paul’s letters, however, can be found in the Diaspora letters of the administrative-halakhic type. To substantiate his thesis, LD analyzes the presentation of the addressor (brother terminology, prophetic and slavery language, peace salutation), co-senders, and co-authors of Pauline correspondence. They all reflect Jewish requirements and patterns. In the same way, Pauline epistolary formulae (the prescript, the proem, body and letter closing) seem to be grounded, more than one usually thinks, in Jewish conventions, liturgical and scriptural traditions, combined with Paul’s own creative theological and Christological reasoning. Paul creatively modifies Jewish models (e.g. notions of “peace” and “grace”) with elements that express tenets of his theology, Christology, and soteriology.

Chapter 9, “The Catholic Epistles and Other Early Christian Letters” (pp. 429-497) offers a closer look at the four early Christian letters which show specific links with Jewish epistolography: 1 Peter, James, Acts 15:23-29, and *1 Clement*. The author begins with a delineation of the Diaspora letter sub-type to establish a background against which the four mentioned “early Christian Diaspora letters” will be read. There are a number of features, according to LD, which qualify 1 Peter as creatively engaging with Jewish epistolary tradition: the use of the term “Diaspora” with the stress on the “otherness” and “rebirth” of the addressees; the salvation-historical *peraeensis*; the term “Babylon” alluding to the temple destructions; and the “peace” salutation. In the same vein, the letter of James addresses “the twelve tribes in the Diaspora”, understood as scattered and persecuted Christians, strengthens their identity, and provides eschatological motivation (the Jeremiah-Baruch letter type). Subsequently, the author argues that Acts 15:23-29 is close to the Jewish Diaspora letters of the administrative-halakhic type. Finally, 1 Clement also incorporates some elements of the “exilic” Diaspora letters, discernible in the image of the “Church of God sojourning in Rome and in Corinth”. The last paragraphs of chapter 9 are dedicated to other early Christian letters (the letter of Jude, 2 Peter, *Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians*, *the Martyrdom of Polycarp*, *the letter of the Christians of Lyon and Vienne*, and *the letter of Dionysius of Corinth to the Romans*) and Christian texts until the 4<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Pastoral letters, Johannine letters and the Revelation) related somehow to the Diaspora traditions.

Chapter 10, “Conclusions” (pp. 498-514), concisely sums up the content and the main sections of the book on ancient Jewish letter writing, on the interplay

between Near Eastern and Greco-Roman epistolography in Jewish letters, and on early Christian writing and the influence of Jewish epistolography upon it. The author finishes by restating his initially put thesis on the material and pragmatic importance of Jewish epistolography for the beginnings and development of early Christian letters.

*Ancient Jewish Letters and the Beginnings of Christian Epistolography* by Lutz Doering is a well-documented, superb scholarly book. It simply speaks for itself. It is a fruit of mature, long-running studies on ancient Jewish and early Christian epistolography carried out by Lutz Doering. The author with great erudition introduces his readers into the realm of ancient Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek letters, showing an extraordinary knowledge of the rich bibliography on the subject. LD reads critically and reconstructs the original texts, analyzing them both synchronically and diachronically. His opinions on the cross-linguistic interaction between Greco-Roman and Aramaic/Hebrew epistolary corpora are well founded and balanced. The analyses of Paul by LD force us to move beyond Greco-Roman epistolography and see the broader picture of cultural and linguistic interaction in which the formal and thematic influence of Jewish letters upon early Christian authors can be spotted. All in all, Lutz Doering makes a persuasive case for the serious use of Jewish letters in New Testament studies. His book is a gem and it is a must to read for the scholars interested in ancient Aramaic and Hebrew epistolography and its influence upon early Christian letters.