Light from the Egyptian Papyri and the Vindolandian Tablets

on Paul's Autographic Subscription to the Galatians

In the subscription to his letter to the Galatians Paul instructs his audience to "observe with what large letters I write to you with my own hand" (Ἴδετε πηλίκοις ὑμῖν γράμμασιν ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρί). Paul has apparently taken over from the scribe to whom he had been dictating his letter and is now penning a summary and farewell greeting in his own hand: i.e., this is his autographic subscription. He takes it for granted that the recipients of his letter will notice that the size of his handwriting is different from that of his scribe. This must have been a feature that was clearly visible on the autograph of the letter, but of course it was effaced already in the earliest copy, just as it is in all of our modern printed texts.

Paul's "large letters" have traditionally been attributed to his poor eyesight, and his poor eyesight has, in turn, been attributed to the blinding light from heaven that he witnessed on his way to Damascus (Acts 9.1-19, 22.6-16, 26.12-18). Scholarly commentaries and articles continue to offer this explanation, as well as various other related and equally imaginative ones. Many have concurred that the large size of Paul's letters is an indication of some sort of physical malady that he suffered, if not from the experience on his way to Damascus, perhaps from another later mystical experience after he returned to Tarsus (2 Cor. 12.2-10), or perhaps simply from the physical wear and tear of an extraordinarily difficult life: in addition to poor eyesight, they have suggested various other larger somatic diseases, as well as more specific physical ailments associated with the normal types of injuries and deformities suffered by those who, like Paul, work with their hands, and even more abnormal injuries associated with beatings, scourgings, and even crucifixion. Others have with somewhat less imagination taken Paul's remark about his own handwriting as an indication that he is placing great emphasis on his statements to follow: his "large letters" are the ancient counterpart to a modern boldface font. This explanation is probably the *communis opinio* of commentators today, and those who subscribe to it naturally regard Gal. 6.12-16 as the centerpiece of his letter.

The real reason for Paul's "large letters," I suspect, is much simpler and, unfortunately, far less intriguing. Paul, as was his habit, had taken the reed from the scribe to whom he had been dictating his letter to the Galatians and was appending an autographic subscription designed to assert the letter's authenticity, i.e., to prove that the letter was from the apostle himself, when he noted, as additional evidence of the fact, that his own writing was different from that of his more professional scribe. A difference in the style of handwriting is a normal feature of subscriptions appended to dictated letters in Greco-Roman antiquity. Large letters in these subscriptions are not unusual, and they are a result of amateurism rather than an indication of a physical malady or a deliberate attempt to emphasize something. It is usually very clear in ancient letters, from as far East as the letters on the Greek papyri from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, to as far West as the letters on the tablets at the Roman military outpost of Vindolandia in northern England, exactly where the scribe has left off and where the author/sender of the letter begins: a smaller, tidier, more regular and uniform, professional hand gives way to a larger, darker, more awkward and clumsy, amateurish hand. This is not to suggest that Paul was lacking in education, or even that he had exceptionally poor penmanship; it is only to observe that Paul, admittedly, had a writing style that was technically less refined than that of the professional scribe to whom he was dictating.

In short, an examination of the hundreds of subscriptions on Greek and Roman letters that have survived from around the time of Paul, from as far East as Egypt to as far West as England, shows that there is nothing unusual about the author of a letter taking over from a professional scribe and writing an autographic subscription, and, further, that there is nothing unusual in the fact that the writing of an autographic subscription is larger than that of the professional scribe; only slightly remarkable is Paul's assertion that he is writing the autograph in his own hand (this occurs in several letters on the Egyptian papyri); the only truly unusual feature here is that Paul explicitly draws his readers' attention to the peculiar style of his handwriting. In other words, Paul's remarks here in his letter to the Galatians place him squarely within the parameters of the Hellenistic and Roman epistolary tradition.