

## BOOK REVIEW

Charles B. Puskas and David Crump, *An Introduction to the Gospels and Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). 228 pp. Pbk. \$19.00/£10.99.

Charles B. Puskas and David Crump acknowledge a void in biblical scholarship that fueled the composition of their new book: the lack of ‘a single-volume, introductory textbook to both the Gospels and the book of Acts’ (p. viii). It is a wonder that so many introductions to the Gospels often lack an examination of Acts—especially if it is held that Luke and Acts were written as a two-volume work. In my own seminary education, our ‘Gospels and Acts’ course required the purchase of one book on the four Gospels and another on Acts through Revelation. If experiences like mine are common, an introductory textbook like Puskas and Crump’s *An Introduction to the Gospels and Acts* is surely welcome.

The authors take on this task while also remaining rather succinct in their treatment—the whole book (minus appendixes) is held to within two hundred pages. As in any introductory textbook, the issue of what to include and what to either footnote or leave out becomes a factor. Puskas and Crump make extensive use of footnotes, not only to support their material but to fill in where only introductory remarks can be made. Given the goal of the book, footnoted material often has to suffice where more in-depth treatment is warranted. As we approach this book critically, the issue of what the authors have chosen to include and what to leave out will play a decisive part in evaluating the book’s contribution to New Testament scholarship.

The two opening chapters (which we are told are adapted from Puskas’s previous *An Introduction to the New Testament*) provide the background necessary for studying the Gospels and Acts. The first chapter tackles the historical context of these books by exploring Greco-Roman and Jewish backgrounds to early Christianity. The first half of this chapter provides a concise history of Hellenistic expansion

and Roman rule. It then focuses on significant Hellenistic thought—including Gnosticism, mystery religions, Hellenistic Judaism and other philosophies. In a similar fashion, the second half provides a brief history of Judaism leading into the first century, with an emphasis on major Jewish beliefs and practices (including the sacrificial system, feasts, the law and apocalyptic eschatology). The authors then detail the competing parties within Judaism: the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes and Zealots. All of the relevant material is presented in this section. A minor flaw in the organization is the authors' choice to describe the four major parties within Judaism *after* they have already incorporated them into Jewish history and custom. Also, since these four groups made up a small percentage of the Jewish population in the first century, it might have been helpful to elaborate on the characteristics of the average Jewish person, or the 'am-ha-aretz'.

The second chapter establishes the historical methods of criticism of the Gospels and Acts (and the New Testament in general). The authors begin by establishing two presuppositions of historical distance to keep in mind when approaching the text: the distance between the modern reader and the texts, and between the time of writing and of the events described. These working presuppositions lay the groundwork for three methods of criticism: source, form and redaction. Before approaching the text with these methods, the authors urge familiarizing oneself with the context of the passage being studied using a series of steps that resemble a historical-grammatical approach. The authors then present source, form and redaction criticism with an examination of their assumptions, significance and methods. Specifically helpful in their discussion is the inclusion of a case study to go along with each interpretative method. What is missing, however, is any sort of critical evaluation of these methods. While their positive contributions are firmly established, there is no discussion of their possible shortfalls. So, for example, the skepticism toward historicity in the Gospels found in many source, form and redaction critics is not addressed in the authors' presentation. There is a whole discussion regarding historicity, the role of eyewitnesses, and a challenge to these historical methods with which the authors fail to interact in any suitable manner. While this chapter does a commendable job of expressing the positive contributions that source, form and redaction criticisms provide, it fails to provide any sort of critical assessment.

In Chapters 3 through 7, the authors look at each book in turn (spreading Luke–Acts into two chapters). Having established the historical-critical method as their approach, Puskas and Crump begin to analyze the texts by assessing their use of sources and identifying forms and redactional activity. Thus, the Gospel of Mark is presented as a ‘collection of independent sayings and stories’ that originated orally until they were compiled by Mark (p. 70). Matthew and Luke’s redaction of Mark and use of their own sources (including Q) are explored in subsequent chapters. It becomes clear that Puskas and Crump are indebted to the work and assumptions of the historical-critical method, but they also incorporate literary, narrative and rhetorical methods into their analyses. While it might have been helpful to introduce these methods as they did source, form and redaction criticism, the use of these additional methods assists in understanding how the Gospel writers compiled their works and articulated their theology.

Puskas and Crump place the composition of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts between AD 70 and 90. The major reason for this is that both Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source and, given prophecy concerning the destruction of the Temple in Mark 13, they assume Mark was written after that event in AD 70. There are numerous scholars who would take issue with such dating and the authors of this book highlight the discussion and remain flexible in their own dating. The biggest problem I had was with dating Luke–Acts so late, since the two-volume work seems to end abruptly with Paul’s fate undetermined in Rome. Paul’s death is typically dated around AD 64 during Nero’s persecution, and it is difficult to believe that Luke would not mention this in his work. Puskas and Crump cite various proposals as to why this could be the case (including that Luke may be hinting at Paul’s death in Acts 28.18), but fail to establish a strong enough case to support their dating. If Luke was writing years after Paul’s death, one must account for why he spent so much time on Paul’s arrest, trials and imprisonment (chs. 21-28) but did not include the outcome.

The Gospel of John stands apart from the Synoptic Gospels in many ways, but Puskas and Crump do a good job of showing many noteworthy similarities between the two bodies of literature. This chapter provides a balanced discussion concerning the authorship and sources of John’s Gospel. As with the other books, the authors discuss the book’s literary features and structure. Unlike in their other analyses, however, they forego a discussion of John’s major themes and instead

develop various reasons for the Gospel's composition (apologetic, eschatological, christological, soteriological and polemical).

In regards to content, this book should be understood as a solid introduction to the Gospels and Acts but not much more than an introduction. Valuable background and introductory material is established while little is presented to do with the actual content of the five books being introduced. Thus, a reader will not engage with the life of Jesus and the early church in this work. There is little attention to Jesus' teaching, passion or theology since the concentration is on how the authors developed their material and on historical context.

There is a balance in how Puskas and Crump present their material that will be helpful for many Bible students, scholars and pastors who use this book. On the one hand, the authors are strongly indebted to the historical-critical method and this impacts how they understand each book's dating, composition and theology. On the other hand, the authors are careful not to allow the presuppositions of these methods to distort the material. The result is a scholarly study of the Gospels and Acts that also upholds the integrity of the texts as Scripture. Nowhere do the authors question the historicity of the events or reduce the books to merely 'good literature'. However, many evangelical scholars may find issues with several points of Puskas and Crump's presentation (particularly their dating of the Gospels or reliance upon form, source and redaction criticism). As a whole, *An Introduction to the Gospels and Acts* is neither a conservative evangelical nor a liberal assessment of the biblical material but lands somewhere between the two. The result is a textbook that serves as a helpful introduction for students with limited exposure to biblical studies yet lacks the depth necessary for a seminary or more advanced course. While Puskas and Crump's book fills a void by combining an introduction to the Gospels and Acts, it would probably need to be supplemented when addressing the content and theology of these texts.

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