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Puskas, Charles, and David Crump

An Introduction to the Gospels and Acts

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Charles Puskas (Ph.D. representative for Eerdmans) is the author of *The Letters of Paul* (Liturgical Press, 1993) and *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Hendrickson, 1999). David Crump (Calvin College) is author of *Jesus the Intercessor: Prayer and Christology in Luke-Acts* (Baker, 1999) and *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Baker, 2006). By their own description, the former is a “mainline scholar,” the latter “a more evangelical scholar.” Together, they have put together an introduction to the narrative works of the New Testament that will be very useful for beginning undergraduate students or adult study groups.

The book begins with two chapters adapted from Puskas’s *Introduction*. The first is a thirty-six-page presentation of the “Historical Context of the Gospels and Acts” that acquaints the reader, as do many such introductions, with the Hellenistic world of the Greco-Roman period and the Jewish context for the birth of the New Testament. There is enough here to provide sufficient background and avoid overgeneralization, but, unlike many such introductions, the chapter also avoids getting lost among the trees of too much detail. Thus, we move quickly and clearly from the conquests of Alexander to the political situation of Roman emperors in the mid-second century of the Common Era and an examination of the diverse philosophical and religious atmosphere of the New

Testament period. Likewise, all the essentials are covered for a portrait of the “tragic history” and the “persistent faith” of Judaism (borrowing language from Spivey and Smith) from the Babylonian exile to the end of the first century. Not only is the explanation in the text clear, but one of the best features of this chapter is that beginning with the very first footnote the reader is provided with references for primary sources and then reliable secondary works for each new topic. Good scholarship is thus not merely reported but is also modeled for the student. While the chapter itself is a relatively brief survey, the student can be guided to go more deeply into this background material.

Chapter 2 focuses on the importance and practice of “Historical Methods of Criticism.” Likening the interpretation of the New Testament to that of the U.S. Constitution, the authors alert the student to the paradox that, while both documents were ostensibly written for common people, they both require more than “common sense” hermeneutics. Even more for the Gospels and Acts, readers have to be conscious of the historical distance both between them and the ancient texts and between the texts and the events they portray. A “common ground of understanding” is needed to bridge the first gap, and for the second, a proper understanding of the trajectory from the life of Jesus and his first disciples through oral tradition to written documents. Historical-critical methods are vital for building both these bridges.

The student is first taught how to read a text closely, contextualize it, compare translations, and explore the critical questions that arise from it. Then the rationale and employment of source, form, and redaction Criticism are explained with case studies that engage the student immediately in the practice of these methods. So, for instance, the authors succinctly show the reader how to mine Mark 1:1–3 for a wealth of information about the intent of the Gospel by attending to the sources that the Evangelist himself acknowledges. They then go on to discuss the use of Mark itself as a source and the challenges of the Synoptic Problem, again with easy-to-follow explanations and tables that present the evidence clearly. Similar case-study instruction is given for form- and redaction-critical exercises.

One thing the authors emphasize in their preface, and carry through rather successfully, is the attitude that students benefit most from having their eyes opened to the breadth of opinion throughout the discipline of New Testament study. They attempt to acquaint readers with a variety of viewpoints and the differing ways of sifting the evidence presented by a text so that they can enter the conversation and reach their own informed opinions. Hence, for example, the authors present the majority view on Synoptic relationships as precisely that but make students aware that there are other ways of seeing the data.

Chapters 3–7 proceed through the four Gospels and Acts. Each chapter begins with an introductory listing of the critical questions to be asked and the themes to be addressed and ends with a concise summary of what has been garnered from the discussion. For Mark, the main headings are: “Major Markan Literary Forms”; “Markan Literary Devices”; “Markan Geographic Scheme”; “Major Themes” (including messianic identity, suffering, discipleship, and eschatology); “Markan Structure”; “Authorship and Date”; and the textual problem of the ending of Mark. For Matthew, they are “Matthean Redaction”; “Structure”; “Major Themes” (including Christ as Messiah-King, as fulfiller of Scripture and interpreter of the law, and the mission to the Gentiles); “The Question of Anti-Semitism”; “Authorship and Setting.”

There are not separate chapters on the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles; the two are treated as a unity. Chapter 5 deals with “Literary Features in Luke-Acts” and so examines Luke’s redaction of his sources in each document, a nicely detailed discussion of “Lukan Style,” and a presentation of various options for structuring the two-volume work. Chapter 6 studies the “Key Themes of Luke-Acts,” beginning with the overarching Lukan scheme of “Salvation History” and moving on to major subthemes (“Salvation to the Gentiles”; “Progression of the Gospel”; “The Holy Spirit”; “Prayer”; “Wealth, Poverty, and the Marginalized”; “Faithful Israel”; and “Roman Tolerance”). The chapter concludes with questions of “Authorship, Setting, and Date.”

Finally, the chapter on the Gospel of John begins with a good summary of the differences and similarities between John and the Synoptics, with a list of scholarly works on the topic that take varying viewpoints. Theories on Johannine sources are then outlined and followed by discussion of the “Unity of John’s Gospel,” the “Process of Composition,” “Literary Characteristics,” and “Structure.” The chapter concludes with presentation of the various suggestions for the “Purpose of the Fourth Gospel,” its “Authorship,” “Place of Composition,” and “Date.”

The book provides very useful tables and charts in each chapter, and there are name, subject, and scripture indices. The footnotes are most welcome and reveal the authors’ knowledge of the literature, both current and historical. As mentioned above, the authors want readers to be aware of the breadth of approaches and opinions in New Testament studies; accordingly, they list not only resources that support their major points but also important works that go in other directions or that attend to issues that they do not. For example, chapter 2 on “Historical Methods of Criticism” ends with a lengthy note (seventeen entries!) on new literary-critical approaches to New Testament study. The chapters on Mark and Matthew both conclude with a note that lists “standard commentaries” on these Gospels. In both of these, I miss the *Sacra Pagina* series. Also, for Mark, the commentary by Frank Moloney (Hendrickson) could have been included. For

Matthew, why include Donald Senior's *What Are They Saying About Matthew?* and not his commentary on Matthew or his *Interpreting Biblical Texts* volume on Matthew (both from Abingdon)? Unfortunately, no such list is provided for either Luke-Acts or John. Those criticisms aside, this volume is a valuable tool for the undergraduate classroom or independent study. It does not summarize the biblical texts and so replace reading them. Its clarity of style and "big picture" approach to the Gospels and Acts serve genuinely to introduce students to what is hoped will be their own satisfying study.