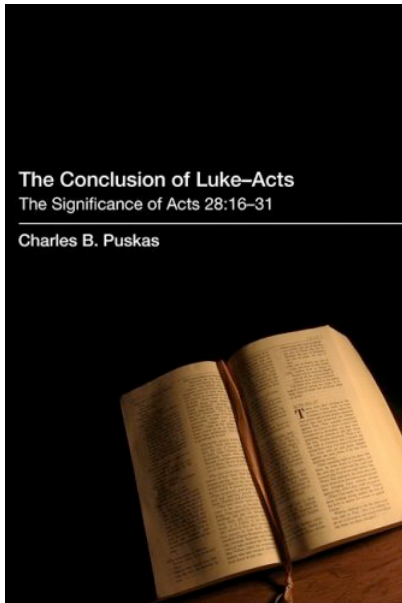


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Puskas, Charles B.

The Conclusion of Luke-Acts: The Significance of Acts 28:16-31

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This reworking of Puskas's doctoral dissertation, which was directed by Robert F. O'Toole, S.J., at Saint Louis University, 1980, aims to engage the gaps and shortcomings to which past scholarship on the conclusion of Acts has been prone. Puskas is particularly interested in the unresolved issues regarding the literary function and theological significance of Acts 28:16-31. In the process of engaging the wide variety of scholarship on these verses Puskas offers a passionate apology for the appropriateness of Luke's climatic conclusion to his two-volume work. He concludes that past scholarship, which has often attempted to argue for one particular function or thematic focus, has failed to view this chapter from a broader perspective and so see how the implied author unites "various themes and elements in the text in order to formulate a clear and distinct message for his implied readers/auditors" (29). In particular, Puskas concludes that Acts 28:16-31 can best be described as concerned with defending Paul and his mission by presenting him as one like Jesus who does the work of Jesus.

Puskas's highly structured approach to his subject begins with a survey of the history of research on Acts 28:16-31. He covers such topics as the significant themes of Acts 28, the historical problems, the abrupt ending, and the intratextual parallels. After the historical problems that concerned past scholars are here deemed irrelevant, due to the opinion that

Luke's compositional concerns were primary in the chapter, this survey leads Puskas to conclude that three main problem areas need to be investigated further: "(1) The nature of the literary forms and the structure of Acts 28:16–31. (2) The nature and extent of the Lukan parallels of Acts 28:16–31. (3) The relationship and purpose (if they exist) of the various themes, patterns, and motifs of Acts 28:16–31 as the conclusion of Luke-Acts" (28). The chapters that follow present the author's investigation of each of these three areas. His examination of the literary forms (ch. 2) and the Lukan parallels (ch. 3) provide the basis upon which he argues in chapter 4 that Luke's defense of Paul in Rome as "one like Christ engaged in Christ's mission ... brings together a variety of themes and motifs which form a grand conclusion to his twin-work" (106)"

In chapter 2, Puskas's main (and most interesting) concern is to demonstrate that Acts 28:17–20 and 25b–28 are in fact speeches and not merely forms of direct address. For Puskas, this heightens the value of these verses, as it is through the speeches in Acts that important themes are conveyed to the readers/auditors. Furthermore, he concludes that each speech conforms to the patterns of other speeches in Acts. Paul's first speech to the Roman Jews (28:17–20) is formally and functionally tied to, but not classified with, Paul's defense speeches in Acts 21–26 (42–46). Puskas identifies this speech as a "passion recital speech" that "defends Paul as one innocent like Jesus" (45). Paul's second speech before the Jewish leaders in Rome is tied to Paul's missionary speech in Pisidian Antioch (specifically 13:46–47) and identified as an apologetic speech on the Gentile mission (54–58). The two main characteristics of these speeches are "(1) the unbelief of the Jews and (2) the turning to the Gentiles" (57).

These two speeches (28:17–20, 25b–28) remain key in the third chapter. Here Puskas provides an intratextual study of Luke-Acts in order to ascertain the nature and extent of the parallels and patterns related to Acts 28. He begins the chapter by comparing Paul's first speech to the Roman Jews with the narrative of Paul's arrest and defense in Acts 21:17–26:32. By outlining structural, linguistic, and thematic parallels between these passages, Puskas concludes that there is a literary relationship between Acts 28 and Acts 21–26. This relationship continues to ascribe to Paul an innocence that the author deems necessary in order for Paul's preaching in Rome to continue openly and unhindered. But this literary connection is stretched beyond Acts as well, when Puskas argues that several defense motifs found in these chapters in Acts reflect the arrest and trial of Jesus in Luke 23. These patterns, Puskas concludes, present Paul "as one innocent like Jesus. Paul undergoes similar experiences as Jesus did and is defended by Luke in a similar manner" (71).

According to Puskas, Acts 21–26 and 28 are concerned not only with a defense of Paul but also with a defense of his mission. In support of this contention, Puskas compares

Paul's second speech to the Roman Jews with Paul's missionary activity throughout Acts (13:44–48; 14:1–7; 17:2–3; 18:4–11; 19:8–10). He outlines here a “typical” process that begins with Paul preaching to Jews, which leads to a response that includes a statement of unbelief or division among the Jews, and then an extension of Paul's mission to the Gentiles (75). This process is also viewed as “in accord with God's plan” and “a direct fulfillment of scripture” (77). These latter statements are confirmed by patterns established in the Gospel, as seen in early prophecies in Luke concerning Jesus' mission (Luke 2:30–32) as well as in Jesus' own ministry and commands (Luke 4:16–30; 24:47–48; Acts 1:8). Such parallels leads Puskas to conclude that “the normative experience of the Pauline mission has a precedent in the ministry of Jesus” and that in Acts 28 Luke intends to portray Paul as “one like Jesus who does the work of Jesus” (95–96).

Caught in the middle of these more broad connections are some attempts to establish patterns that are hard-pressed. This is true of Puskas's comparisons of Acts 28 with Luke's preface and with Luke 24. It seems that his attempts to see connections everywhere are encouraged by the fairly strict formal structure of his own volume. This structure is also problematic in terms of his use of footnotes. In many cases, the footnotes contain necessary and supportive information that should be in the body of the text (e.g., 54 n. 60, 79 n. 41, 80 n. 43).

Puskas's compositional analysis ultimately provides a helpful, broadening view of the function of the final chapter in Acts. Although little of the analysis presented in this volume is original, Puskas does fulfill his aim of coalescing earlier scholarship's varied conclusions as to Luke's enigmatic conclusion, and he does succeed in providing an interesting and textually viable way to recognize the various ways that the significance of Acts 28 has been described. By connecting both Luke's concern to defend Paul (Acts 28:17–20) and extend the Christian mission to the Gentile community (28:23–31) with Luke's defense of Jesus and his own expansive ministry to all nations, Puskas acknowledges the climatic resolutions emphasized in the past. These resolutions include the progressive nature of the gospel, the apologetic strands within scholarly opinion, as well as the concern with recognizing the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. This is expressed clearly in Puskas's description of the relevance of the conclusion of Acts for Luke's implied readers/auditors: (1) the conclusion defends “the life and work of their great predecessor who did the work of Christ”; (2) it establishes “some continuity with their Christian heritage going back to Paul, the Twelve, and Jesus”; and (3) it provides “the readers/auditors (followers of Jesus) with some kind of pattern and program for world mission” (135).