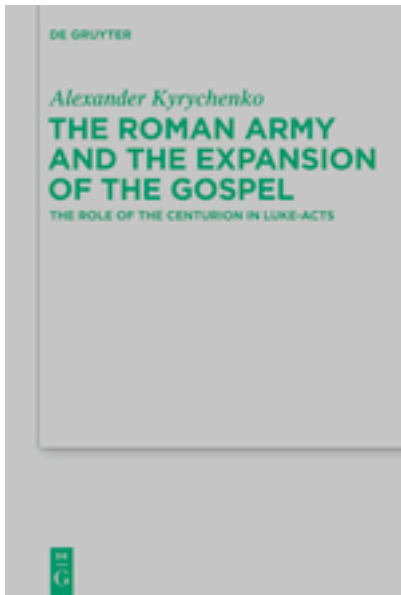


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Alexander Kyrychenko

***The Roman Army and the Expansion of the Gospel:
The Role of the Centurion in Luke-Acts***

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This study originates in Alexander Kyrychenko's dissertation, defended in 2013 at Emory University (Atlanta, Georgia). The author investigates the literary function of the Roman military in general and centurions in particular in Luke-Acts. The main title and subtitle reveal a recurring element: How much deals with the Roman army, and how much on the actual role of centurions in Luke's narratives? Kyrychenko deals with both in six chapters: an introduction, three on background material, one on the main research question on Luke-Acts, which is comparatively brief (143–84), and a concluding chapter. The volume is helpfully supplemented by a bibliography and three indexes (modern authors, subjects, and primary sources).

The introductory chapter explains—truly in a nutshell (3–8)—the research question and relevant scholarly literature, the scope, methodology, argument, and plan of the study. The literature review describes the merits and gaps of only three works on New Testament questions: two articles (Vernon Robbins, 1991; T. R. Hobbs, 2001) and a key dissertation (Laurena Ann Brink, 2009; now published in 2014, WUNT 2/362). Brink and Kyrychenko's studies have similar questions and were both published this year. Kyrychenko finds that Brink's analysis of Luke's use of soldiers is too much influenced by

the negative stereotypes that she identified concerning Roman soldiers in ancient literature.

Kyrychenko also acknowledges the extensive research on the Roman military, but he claims that none of these works provides an in-depth examination of “the depiction and function of the military in the New Testament texts” (7). Thus he seeks to make a contribution first to New Testament studies and second to Roman history in general by elucidating the literary function of the Roman military and centurions in Luke-Acts (6). It would have been constructive to include a description of his literary or narrative approach as well as key terms, such as *characterization* (since his study deals with characters) and *plot* (mentioned on 9). A hint that there might be some lack of clarity regarding approaches is found on page 7, where Kyrychenko states the aim of the book: “This book will consider the role of the Roman centurion in the narrative of Luke-Acts.” What kind of role: literary or narrative (4)? Further, how does he intend to implement this approach? In addition, Kyrychenko reads Luke and Acts together, but he does not justify this as a narrative unity (4), nor does he provide discussion about Luke and his readership, whether as authorial audience or implied reader.

The second chapter, “Luke-Acts in the Roman Military Setting” (9–45) reads clearly as Kyrychenko focuses mainly on describing ancient material; typical of the entire book, his interaction with modern scholars takes place in the footnotes. He provides valuable background information on the development of Roman military structure and the role of centurions. He sheds light on questions such as the importance of allegiance between rulers and the military and the presence of Roman military in Palestine from the conquest of Pompey in 63 BCE until the Flavian emperors. A key section treats the military terminology in Luke-Acts (37–39): *ἐκατοντάρχης* (Luke 7:2, 6; 23:47; Acts 10:1, 22; 21:32; 22:25–26; 23:17, 23; 24:23; 27:1, 6, 11, 31, 43) and *χιλίαρχος* (Acts 21:31–33, 37; 22:24, 26–29; 23:10, 15, 17–19, 22; 24:22). Kyrychenko argues that Luke’s use of these terms corresponds respectively to the military ranks of *centurio* and *tribinus militum* in Latin. It would have been helpful to produce statistics of occurrences in other New Testament and Septuagint texts. It is significant for the purposes of the study that Luke uses *ἐκατοντάρχης* sixteen out of twenty times total in the New Testament (only four other occurrences, all in Matthew).

Chapter 3, “The Image of the Roman Soldier in Greco-Roman Sources” (46–89), presents commentary on the Roman army and soldiers in a variety of sources: history, biographies, edicts, and nonliterary sources. Here readers have first-hand contact with primary sources, especially through several extended quotations. Kyrychenko helpfully describes each source and, when possible, the authors’ historical situation and relation to the Roman military. Some of the key elements of this chapter are the highlighted differences

of representation of Roman soldiers, which mostly tend to be negative portrayal. Julius Caesar and Velleius Paterculus, however, provide positive commentary on Roman soldiers, whose bravery and loyalty are praised.

Kyrychenko provides several examples of commentary about soldiers' immoral behavior, such as idleness, mutiny, and greed with respect to their superiors, as well as debauchery and violence among local populations. The extent of this misconduct leads to the development of literary topoi about Roman soldiers. Authors often use these examples as parallels to the decline of Roman society and empire. Some authors reveal a certain prejudice toward noncitizen soldiers (*auxilia*). Despite this negative depiction, sources do indicate soldiers' positive contribution to peace and administrative order in the regions. At times centurions were called upon to perform investigations and to intervene in legal issues: "In a sense, the centurions made the power of Rome directly accessible, and thereby they were effectively integrated into the power structure of the local society, inspiring the provincials to establish and exploit positive relations to their benefit" (90).

Chapter 4, "The Image of the Roman Soldier in Jewish Sources" (91–142) follows the same procedure as the preceding chapter. Kyrychenko examines a variety of Jewish sources such as 1 Maccabees, prophetic and apocalyptic literature, Philo, nonliterary sources, talmudic documents, and then especially Josephus (112–40!). Obviously, for authors who had knowledge of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, this was a stinging subject. Indeed, these sources reveal much about the views on Roman military as a foreign power, yet much less on the roles of soldiers and centurions. Josephus's texts are the most helpful for shedding light on the actual roles of soldiers due to the quantity of material and their closeness to the time of redaction of Luke's writings (113).

All sources recognize the Roman army as an "invincible force" (140). Indeed, they are agents of divine judgment on the Jewish people. Yet, their attitudes toward the occupying power differ. The prophetic sources denounce the Romans for their immoral behavior and pronounce God's judgment on them (as he judged other empires in the past). Josephus does not go this far. Although he recognizes cases of inappropriate conduct, he mainly shifts the blame for Jewish suffering onto the anti-Jewish allies (or *auxilia*), incompetent Roman administrators, divisive Jewish leaders, and the sins of the Jewish people (141). Philo and Josephus illustrate the influence of leaders on the army with positive and negative examples. Soldiers follow the example of their leaders' attitudes and conduct toward the population. Although Josephus advances the Greco-Roman topos of the centurions' courageous leadership on the battlefield, he does not foster the topos of corruption of military in the eastern part of the empire. In sum, in contrast to other sources, Josephus provides a positive portrayal of the Roman army. Philo and nonliterary

sources provide examples of centurions carrying out arrests, assistance, and justice for the Roman administration, as well as legal and financial help within a local population.

Chapter 5, “The Roman Military in Luke-Acts” (143–184), describes Luke’s portrayal of the Roman army in general and of centurions in particular within the double narrative. The analysis transpires in a curious manner, since the treatment of pertinent passages does not move within the narrative progression. Instead, Kyrychenko chooses to present the two main passages on centurions together (Luke 7 and Acts 10–11) in §5.4 (153–82). However, §5.3 (“The Roman Army in the Acts of the Apostles”) is barely three pages, which covers the fascinating interaction between Paul and centurions in Jerusalem and then during the journey from Caesarea to Rome. As a literary study (or narrative study; both adjectives are used on 4), this choice is unfortunate, because the analysis departs from the narrative progression that readers encounter and does not fully exploit the presence of centurions in exegetical discussion. In addition, a certain anticlimactic cloud falls on this section as Kyrychenko provides the treatment on the main centurion passages, which is followed by a section summary (180–82), a chapter summary (182–84), and then the book’s conclusion (185–89). Much of these paragraphs review Luke 7 and Acts 10–11. At this point, the reader of this volume has lost a sense of the building tension and irony at the end of Acts when God leads Paul to Rome through Roman soldiers. Paul, as a Roman citizen, had made an appeal to defend himself before Caesar, but would he even make it to Rome alive?

Positively, Kyrychenko has noted an important technique in Luke-Acts, the use of parallels between characters, such as the first centurion and the widow, Jesus and Elijah and Elisha, and the first centurion’s faith and Cornelius’s conversion. Kyrychenko does not note that these evince an ancient technique known as *synkrisis*. The main section on Cornelius contains rich description, moving from the historical background about Cornelius’s name and piety to the simultaneous visions and the impact of the conversion of Cornelius and his family. Kyrychenko reflects in detail on the significance of Peter’s exclamation οὗτός ἐστιν πάντων κύριος (“this one is the Lord of all,” Acts 10:36) in light of Cornelius’s conversion in Caesarea. This strategic place for the empire was not only the placement of the Roman cohort but also the “Palestinian center of the imperial cult” (177). Overall, Luke’s description of the Roman military is positive. He even avoids portraying the army in a negative light by underlining the responsibility of the Jewish people and leaders in the passion narrative and by citing more prophecies about the destruction of Jerusalem and with greater clarity compared to the other gospel writers (183). This reflects the position in Jewish sources that views the Roman army as an instrument for accomplishing God’s judgment and will. This is illustrated by those scenes that show Roman military offering protection and passage for Paul. Kyrychenko clearly illustrates the presence and activity of Roman military at key stages in the gospel story, for

example, from the soldiers' question to John the Baptist, the centurion's recognition of Jesus as prophet (Luke 7), the centurion's declaration at the cross, to Cornelius's conversion and ensuing example as a "prototypical Gentile believer" (183).

Now to some concluding remarks. As mentioned, closer readings could have been accorded to the centurions' interventions in relation to the final stage of Paul's movement from Jerusalem to Rome. These passages could have been treated as a part of the collective depiction of these characters and within the reader's progressive encounter of the story. Kyrychenko has certainly demonstrated that Luke is up to something by highlighting Roman military presence at various key points in the narrative. Still, more could have been said about their cumulative effect on the pragmatic level. For example, what could Luke be trying to evoke in his readers through these surprising examples of faith? If Kyrychenko had placed the passages within the narrative progression (or plot, from the reader's perspective) and had suggested possible pragmatic aims that Luke had for his readership, then a fuller *narrative* analysis would have been performed. For this, Robert Tannehill's commentaries on Luke and Acts (both not cited) could have been beneficial for his project. Also, more scholarly interaction from the footnotes could have been integrated into the body of the work (e.g., 150 n. 26).

Despite these points that could have strengthened Kyrychenko's approach and argument, his book provides thoughtful interaction with an impressive number of literary and nonliterary sources from the Greco-Roman and Jewish settings. This allows readers to have a greater understanding of various viewpoints about the Roman army and how they affected ancient literature and culture. This is a valuable contribution concerning the Roman Empire and especially military in relation to the messianic movement expanding out of Palestine into various parts of the Mediterranean basin. Luke's positive portrayal of the Roman military (not to be confused with all things Roman in Luke-Acts) raises some questions about Luke and his readership practicing their faith in a Lord who was not Caesar and having regular, if not daily contact, with Roman soldiers.

For future editions, I mention a few errors: "In words of Suetonius" (25); infantry (41 n. 174); "have God is on their side" (141); "Roman army as deadly force" (183); "in wake of the Jesus's ministry" (183).