

APOSTLES AND POLITICS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

JULIA A. SNYDER

Abstract. This essay discusses political perspectives in several extrabiblical stories about the apostles: the *Acts of Peter*, *Acts of Thekla*, *Acts of Paul* (Ephesus and Martyrdom episodes), and *Acts of John at Rome*. It investigates the literary function of references to political figures, observing that their presence both decorates the literary backdrop and serves to advance the plot. The essay also argues that these narratives should not be described as "anti-imperial," drawing on Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* as a reference text.

Keywords: Acts of Peter, Acts of Thekla, Acts of Paul, Acts of John at Rome, Philostratus, political, anti-imperial, apocryphal Acts

This essay assesses "political" perspectives in stories about the apostles, focusing on the *Acts of Peter* in its Vercelli version, the *Acts of Thekla*, a narrative about Paul in Ephesus, and a story about Paul's martyrdom. It investigates the literary function of references to political figures and analyses political stances at a narrative level. While many aspects of the stories can of course be considered "political," I will focus for the sake of space on government officials, legal proceedings, and the question of whether the stories are "anti-imperial." Two other narratives, the *Acts of John at Rome* and Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, will serve as reference points for the latter discussion.

Commentators do not always define the term "anti-imperial" before applying it to ancient texts, but a definition is essential if one wishes to make or refute such a claim. In this essay, a narrative will be considered "anti-imperial" if and only if it challenges the ongoing earthly validity of the (Roman) imperial system, and would have been acknowledged by its producer to do so, had the issue been brought to his or her attention.¹ The first half of this definition reflects the fact that one can critique politicians or political systems without necessarily wishing for a wholesale change of system or regime. (Indeed, modern democracies thrive on this principle.) The second half of the definition recognizes that "subversive" is in the eye of the

¹ My definition does not assume that producers had actually thought about what their narratives communicate in this regard. In this paper, I use the term "producers" to refer to real persons who produced written versions of the narratives under investigation. The term is preferable to "author" for narratives that were continually reworked over the centuries and whose earliest versions cannot be reconstructed with any certainty.