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'SOPHISTIC' APOSTLES. CLASSICAL CHARACTERIZATIONS AS FOREIGNERS AND MAGICIANS IN THE FIVE MAJOR APOCRYPHAL ACTS

APÓSTOLES SOFÍSTICOS. CARACTERIZACIONES CLÁSICAS COMO EXTRANJEROS Y MAGOS EN LOS CINCO HECHOS APÓCRIFOS PRINCIPALES

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ABSTRACT

The Platonic dialogues present a vivid portrayal of the sophists through the eyes of characters who often perceive their activities in a negative light. These descriptions emphasize rhetorical prowess, perceived as manipulative or even magical. Similarly, non-Christian characters in the apocryphal Acts describe the apostles using terminology reminiscent of the characterization of the sophists, emphasizing their foreignness, itinerant nature, and persuasive or miraculous abilities. The linguistic and literary parallels between these portrayals suggest the use of similar narrative patterns of characterization of both groups, reflecting broader social perceptions of persuasive figures challenging established norms at a narrative level. Understanding these connections sheds light on the socio-cultural context of the early Christian world, suggesting a continuity of themes and perceptions across diverse literary traditions.

Keywords: Sophists, Apostles, Apocryphal Acts, Narrative description, Foreigners, Magic

RESUMEN

Los diálogos platónicos presentan un vívido retrato de los sofistas a través de la mirada de personajes que a menudo perciben sus actividades como negativas. Estas descripciones subrayan su competencia retórica, percibida como manipuladora o incluso mágica. De igual modo, personajes no cristianos en los Hechos apócrifos describen a los apóstoles utilizando una terminología que remite a la caracterización de los sofistas, resaltando su extranjería, su naturaleza itinerante y sus habilidades persuasivas y mágicas. Los paralelos lingüísticos y literarios entre estos retratos sugiere el uso de idénticos patrones narrativos para la caracterización de ambos grupos, que reflejan percepciones más amplias sobre estas figuras que desafían las normas establecidas dentro de la narración. Entender estas conexiones arrojaría luz sobre el contexto socio-cultural del mundo del cristianismo primitivo, sugiriendo una continuidad de temas y percepciones en diferentes tradiciones literarias.

Palabras clave: Sofistas, Apóstoles, Hechos apócrifos, Descripción narrativa, Extranjeros, Magia



SUMMARY

1. Sophists: foreigners, masters, rhetoricians, and corruptors. 2. Apostles seen as foreigners. 3. Rhetorical ability, miracles, and magic of the apostles. 4. Conclusion. 5. Bibliography

1. SOPHISTS: FOREIGNERS, MASTERS, RHETORICIANS, AND CORRUPTORS¹

During the 5th and 4th centuries in Athens, sophists were an active group of itinerant instructors known for their expertise in rhetoric, ethics, and persuasion². They gained prominence in a time of significant intellectual and philosophical growth and societal change in ancient Greece³. These educators catered to individuals seeking success in public life, particularly within the democratic structure of Athenian society, all along the 5th century and after the short period in which the Thirty Tyrants installed their oligarchic regime in 404 BC.

The sophists did not follow a single philosophical doctrine. Instead, they offered various teachings, primarily focusing on practical education. Moreover, they emphasized teaching the art of persuasive speaking, crucial for success in Athenian democracy where public speaking skills were vital for political advancement, but also other areas such as astronomy, mathematics, ethnography, or doxography. One notable aspect of their teachings was relativism (Kerferd 1981, 83-110), suggesting that truths and morals were subject to individual perception and social norms. This viewpoint attracted criticism

1 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of the manuscript and for their insightful suggestions. Their comments have significantly contributed to improving the clarity and depth of the argumentation.

2 As for the general description of sophists in the Classical period from various perspectives, including historical, social, and philosophical, the bibliography is extensive. It is advisable to read at least some of the most notable works on this topic: Guthrie (1979); Kerferd (1981); de Romilly (1982); Billings – Moore (2008); O'Grady (2023).

3 The statement by Dillon and Gergel (2023, X) on this matter is sufficient to understand how the sophists filled 'a gap in the market' in 5th-century Athenian society.

from established philosophers like Plato, and Socrates through the works of the former. Plato accused the sophists of being morally sceptical and intellectually shallow in his dialogues, portraying them as skilled speakers lacking deeper understanding of absolute truth and virtue.

The sophists play a prominent role in numerous Platonic dialogues, such as the *Gorgias* or the *Protagoras*, where Socrates engages in discussions with two of the most famous among these rhetoric masters who originate from various regions of Greece. However, among Plato's works, the dialogue that distinctly delineates the social profile of the sophists is the *Sophist* itself⁴. This text, considered part of Plato's later writings, is estimated to have been penned between 367 and 362 BC, closely preceding the Athenian philosopher's third travel to the Greek cities of Sicily. Curiously enough, in the *Sophist*, Socrates does not appear as the main character of the dialogue but rather as another participant in the conversation recorded by Plato.

In his *Sophist*, Plato continues the trajectory set by Isocrates in his work *Against the Sophists*. Originating around 392 BC, this text aimed to establish the guiding principles of Isocrates' teaching methodology, distinguishing it from the basic ideas of both Eristic and Sophistic doctrines. In *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates accuses this group of creating high expectations and claiming to be capable of teaching virtue (ἀρετή) and justice (δικαιοσύνη), two qualities that they did not actually possess. Furthermore, he criticizes their lack of rhetorical knowledge and their disregard for concepts such as seizing the opportune moment (ὁ καιρός), adapting discourse to circumstances (τὸ πρέπον), or originality. In addition, the sophists demand

4 On the definition of the word σοφιστής see, for example, Guthrie (1979, 27-35) or Kerferd (1981, 25-41).

large sums of money for imparting their teachings.

It is important to note that the sophists, who commonly come from other Greek regions (Guthrie 1979, 40-41), are typically hosted in the households of Athenian individuals in Plato's dialogues, where they impart their teachings. The inherent foreignness of these professionals stands as a fundamental characteristic (Tell 2011, 93-112). Paradoxically, in Plato's *Sophist*, a foreigner (ξένος) who has come from Elea to Athens provides the description of the Sophist in the central section of the dialogue (222a-231c). Here, the sophists face the following critiques: they are greedy, as they solely aim to receive their fees, and become hunters of wealthy young individuals (222a-223b); they are merchants or retailers of the souls' knowledge (223b-224d); fabricators and purveyors of knowledge (224e); professional arguers (225a-226a), professional refuters, and purifiers of the soul (226a-231c)⁵. Essentially, they are described as charlatans and illusionists, capable of corrupting the young Athenians whom they, apparently, were educating. In conclusion, the criticisms by the foreigner in Plato's dialogue revolve around highlighting the rhetorical skills of the sophists, their persuasive ability –almost bordering on the realm of the magical or thaumaturgical– and the harmful consequences of their actions for the city at large and, specifically, for the youth. Plato employs explicit to this effect, such as the terms γόης ('sorcerer'; *Sophist* 235a [bis]; 241b), or θαυματοποιός ('wonder-worker'), as when the Stranger claims that the sophists 'belongs to the class of the wonder-workers' (*Sophist* 235b: τοῦ γένους εἶναι τοῦ τῶν θαυματοποιῶν).

All these characterization strategies of the sophists are part of the usual narrative repertoire for identifying a potential enemy by a certain social group that perceives their activities as dangerous to their interests and

/ or values. In some of these statements, one can also recognize prototypical elements in the characterization of the foreigner within Greek mythographic and literary tradition⁶, and even of the mendicant priests or the wandering poets⁷, always based on conceptions and prejudices widely spread throughout the societies of the ancient world. In the latter, surrounded by a certain aura of mysticism, the itinerant nature of their activity –much like that of the sophists– was a fundamental aspect of their narrative profile.

2. APOSTLES SEEN AS FOREIGNERS

There are many differences between the sophists and the apostles and their respective contexts of emergence. However, at a narrative level, these differences seem less insurmountable.

If one wishes to transition from the general to more specific and particular aspects, it is advisable to initiate our analysis by examining macrostructural elements of these apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. Subsequently, attention can be directed towards specific aspects of the narratives. Initially, it is essential to recall the main theme of these texts: the journey of preaching. It is noteworthy that within the context of the expansion of Christian doctrine during the early centuries of our era, the journey of preaching or apostolic mission serves as a fundamental element contributing to the dissemination of ideas and structuring the narrative sequence of these texts. Furthermore, this type of journey is already described in the canonical *Acts of the Apostles* or in the Pauline epistles, providing sufficient indications to consider it a historical reality, typified according to literary parameters of the time within these narratives, depicting the

⁶ For a general overview of this phenomenon, see Graziani and Zucker (2018).

⁷ For further analysis on this topic, see Hunter and Rutherford (2009). I would like to express my sincere gratitude to one of the reviewers of this article for suggesting the inclusion of the mendicant priests criticized in *Republic* 346d–365a within this group.

⁵ Regarding the six definitions or characteristics attributed to the sophists by the stranger in the dialogue, see Narcy (2013) and Bernabé (2013).

apostles' preaching across various regions of the ancient world, were created.

From this perspective, scholarly criticism has concurred in emphasizing the connections between the Greek novel and these apocryphal Acts of the apostles, particularly due to their shared use of the element of travel, a feature highlighted by Söder (1932, 21-50) in his seminal study on this subject. Indeed, the journey structurally shapes the narrative sequence of the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, often outlining a route with various stages where different events are recounted, primarily related to the apostle's preaching and miracles, and the conversions it engenders⁸. Moreover, the major apocryphal texts about the apostles circulated within the Greek manuscript tradition under the title *περίοδοι* ("journeys") (Patlagean 1991; Lequeux 2007), a descriptive label for the content of the works that can be reliably traced back to the time of Jerome of Stridon (4th century), who refers to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* with this term in *De viris illustribus* 7.

The apostle Andrew's preaching and his martyrdom take place in Achaea, specifically in Patras, where the apostle is said to have arrived from the Palestinian region (*Acts of Andrew* = AA). In the case of the *Acts of John* (= AJ), the core of the narrative is situated in the city of Ephesus. However, the text also reflects his movements to other cities in Asia Minor such as Smyrna or Laodicea. Eventually, he returns to Ephesus, where he concludes his life after numerous conversions and miracles⁹. In the *Acts of Peter* (AP), following the sequence of the narrative intertwined between the section of the so-called *Actus Verecellenses* (= AV) and the *Martyrdom of Peter* (= MPt), the apostle's journey originates in Jerusalem and

culminates in Rome. Although the text in this case does not delve into details in describing the stages of the journey or various events that may have occurred during it, but rather focuses on what unfolds upon Peter's arrival in Rome, the journey once again serves as a backdrop. Furthermore, in the renowned *Quo Vadis* scene where Peter was preparing to flee Rome to avoid martyrdom, the motif of the journey is implicitly present¹⁰. As for the *Acts of Paul*, the element of travel becomes much more evident. If we combine the various preserved papyrus fragments (= APf), along with the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (= APfTh), the *Third Letter to the Corinthians*, and the *Martyrdom of Paul* (= MPf), the result is a narrative crafted from different stages of an apostolic journey that broadly follows the itinerary of Paul through various locations in Asia Minor, culminating in Rome. Thus, the journey begins in Damascus; from there, the apostle travels to Jerusalem, proceeding from Jerusalem to Antioch, then to Iconium, followed by a return to Antioch. Subsequently, he heads towards Myra, then arrives at Sidon, proceeding to Tyre, later to Ephesus, reaching Philippi, then Corinth, and finally departing to Italy, where he faces martyrdom in Rome (Giménez Delgado 2020). Lastly, in the *Acts of Thomas* (= ATh), the journey of preaching becomes the initial motif of the narrative, featuring the renowned scene of dividing regions for the apostolic mission, which, according to tradition, occurred after the death of Jesus in Jerusalem (Kaestli 1981, 252-253). Thomas will embark forcibly on a journey that will first take him to the enigmatic city of Andrapolis¹¹, and later to India, where the most significant part of his mission of conversion and spreading Christianity will unfold before he meets martyrdom.

In both cases, within their respective narratives, sophists and apostles are welcomed into the homes of prominent local figures in

8 The importance of this motif can be observed in the inclusion of the scene depicting the division of the apostolic fields of mission at the beginning of the *Acts of Thomas*. This implies a journey in which the apostle is the protagonist and is tasked with the mission of converting people through his words and miracles (Kaestli, 1981).

9 On the structure of the sections of the AJ preserved so far, see Junod and Kaestli (1983a, 98-100).

10 For deeper analysis of this scene, see Norelli (2007).

11 On the location, etymology and narrative function of this city, see Muñoz Gallarte and Narro (2020).

the cities where they carry out their preaching activity. Just as the apostles are hosted in the houses of Christian individuals, Plato likewise explicitly notes, for example, that the sophist Gorgias was received by Callicles (*Gorgias* 447b), and Protagoras by Callias, the son of Hipponicus (*Protagoras* 311a). In this way, the house (οἶκος) becomes the preferred venue for teaching and transmitting ideas, in addition to the agora or the public square. In such a context, one might consider a preference for open and public spaces to facilitate the expansion and dissemination of the message. However, the use of the house as a space, at least open to a significant group of individuals who could be regarded as members of a certain community or, in any case, sharing a set of common ideas, appears supported by these accounts¹². In conclusion, the οἶκος becomes a space not only for hospitality but also for the transmission of the doctrine of both sophists or apostles¹³.

In AA 15, the apostle Andrew lodges in an inn (ξενία) where he is visited by Stratocles, who has recently been converted to Christianity by the apostle. Moreover, the main passage for observing the characterization of the apostle through allusion to the same topicalized elements in narrative fiction already used by Plato in the *Sophist* appears in AA 25, when a slave describes to the proconsul Aegeates the activities of Andrew in the city. The servant begins his discourse by describing the apostle with the term ξένος¹⁴, to which he later adds comments about his reputation due to his thaumaturgical abilities¹⁵, exceeding human strength in his eyes (ὕπερ ἀνθρώπων ἰσχὺν).

Furthermore, he adds a curious reflection on the change in behaviour observed by the slave in Stratocles, Aegeates' brother, after associating with the apostle, which, beyond the fact itself, focuses on a social aspect. The slave is surprised that Stratocles goes to the gymnasium carrying his own little oil flask, and appears in public doing his own chores, even if he owns many slaves (AA 25: ἐαυτῷ ληκύθιον εἰς τὸ γυμνάσιον εἰσκομίζει. Ὁ δούλος πολλοὺς ἔχων αὐτοδιάκων δείκνυται). This last comment indicates how Andrew's actions are interpreted as harmful against the customs and established social practices in the city to which he arrives as an asset not only foreign but also strange. This idea is reinforced by the chain of vocatives used by Aegeates to address the apostle directly when he is in prison. According to him (AA 51), Andrew is a foreign man (ξένε ἀνθρώπε), alien to this present life (ἀλλότριε τοῦ νῦν βίου) -something that from a Christian perspective would be considered positive-, an enemy of Aegeates' house (ἐχθρὲ τῆς ἐμῆς οἰκίας), and a plague upon his entire household (λυμῶν τοῦ παντός μου οἴκου).

In the *APT*, the aspect of the apostle Paul as a foreigner is highlighted primarily at the beginning of the narrative, particularly in the scene that includes the physical description of the apostle¹⁶, where the pious Onesiphorus together with his wife and children, awaited Paul's arrival at the entrance of the road from Lystra to Iconium in order to host him in their home. Similar to the Platonic dialogues where sophists are hosted by local characters, Paul is welcomed by Onesiphorus and his family into their home¹⁷, right next to that of Thecla.

In the first part of the narrative, Paul is considered a foreigner by the two antagonistic characters, who are alien to and opposed to the Christian doctrine, ultimately facing off against the apostle and Thecla herself: the

12 On the use of houses as churches for spreading the Christian message during the first centuries of our era, see, for example, Grant (1977, 167-71) or Osiek and Macdonald (2006, 12-15).

13 One should remember the consideration of the sophists as teachers of many Athenian noblemen (Marrou 1960, 84-86).

14 On the neutral consideration of this term for characterizing the apostle in AA 51, see Roig Lanzillotta (2007, 147).

15 This aligns with the use of the term ξένος in relation to the realm of the marvelous or, if preferred, the

miraculous in the paradoxographical literature of Greek tradition (Giannini 1963, 251).

16 On this scene, see, for example Grant (1982); Omerzu, (2008); Malherbe (1986) or Bollok (1996).

17 On the socio-economic profile of Onesiphorus' family, see Osiek and Balch (1997, 97-98).

girl's mother, Theocleia, and her betrothed, Thamyras. Theocleia refers to Paul as a 'foreign man' (ἀνδρὶ ξένῳ) in her description of the scene awaiting Thamyras, who had hurriedly come to meet his beloved. In her speech (*APTh* 8), Theocleia explains Thecla's strange behavior by attributing it to the grandiose and deceptive words of the apostle (ἀπατηλοῦς καὶ ποικίλους λόγους), whom she also accuses of troubling the modesty of her virgin daughter (με θαυμάζειν πῶς ἢ τοιαύτη αἰδῶς τῆς παρθένου χαλεπῶς ἐνοχλεῖται) (Narro 2021, 46-47). Thus, the mother associates Paul's foreign character with his preaching, similar to what Thamyras, the betrothed, does in *APTh* 13, when in conversation with the traitors Demas and Hermogenes, he inquires about Paul's teachings (διδασκαλία), and asserts that Thecla felt love for him, a stranger, (φιλεῖ τὸν ξένον) and he was being robbed of marriage (ἀποστεροῦμαι γάμου)¹⁸.

Furthermore, in the *APTh*, Thecla also presents herself as a foreigner to the syrian governor Alexander when he attempts to embrace and kiss her in the second part of the narrative, in Antioch. In fact, she implores him not to force 'the foreigner and the slave of God' (*APTh* 26: Μὴ βιάση τὴν ξένην, μὴ βιάση τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δούλην). Thecla's assertion here indicates how, from the moment she decides to accompany Paul on his mission, she also assumes, in some way, the functions inherent to apostleship (Barrier 2009, 142-143), among which is the necessity to travel to other cities preaching the word of God. Therefore, in her protest to Alexander, her foreign character is combined with the label of 'slave of God' (δούλη τοῦ θεοῦ), one of the most common formulas used to refer to followers of the new religion in the context of early Christianity, employing the slavery metaphor¹⁹.

In the *ATh*, the same narrative strategy is repeated: depicting the apostle as a foreigner

by characters who are alien to the Christian belief and who, in one way or another, are affected by the apostle's evangelizing activity, either positively or negatively²⁰. Thomas's foreignness is emphasized in different scenes of the account of the evangelistic mission of the apostle in India, when he is *de facto* a stranger, since India was beyond the limits of the Graeco-Roman world.

In the first act of Thomas, that of the wedding at Andrapolis, the indian merchant Abanes, who had bought Thomas as a slave in Jerusalem, discusses with the apostle how it would be best to obey the king's order for everyone in the city, including foreigners, to attend the celebration for the marriage of his daughter, since they did not want to offend the king, and because they themselves were indeed foreigners (*ATh* 4: ἵνα μὴ προσκρούσωμεν τῷ βασιλεῖ, καὶ μάλιστα ξένοι ὄντες). Once at the celebration, Thomas sits in the middle of the banquet, far away from Abanes and the rest of the guests. He is observed as a foreigner by all the guests as the text clearly stresses it (*ATh* 4: ἀπέβλεπον δὲ εἰς αὐτὸν πάντες ὡς εἰς ξένον καὶ ἐξ ἀλλοδαπῆς ἐλθόντα γῆς). After the conversion of the newlyweds performed by the apostle with the help of the apparition of Jesus in the bridal chamber, the groom thanks 'the Lord who has been proclaimed' by the foreigner one, i.e. Thomas (*ATh* 15: εὐχαριστῶ σοι κύριε ὁ διὰ τοῦ ξένου ἀνδρὸς κηρυχθεῖς). Thomas's status as a foreigner is particularly highlighted in the final part of the *ATh*, where the conversions of Mygdonia, Tertia, Marcia, Vazan, and Mnesara are narrated, which will provoke the open conflict with the husbands of the first two women, the nobleman Charisius and the Indian king Misdus. In fact, Thomas was staying in the city at the house of the general Siphor, where many people came and went to listen to the apostle, according to Charisius's own words (*ATh* 100: καὶ πολλοὶ εἰσιν οἱ εἰσιόντες καὶ ἐξιόντες).

18 On the use of erotic vocabulary and the subversion of traditional erotic themes of the novel in the apocryphal acts, see Konstan (1998, 15-36). For the *APTh*, see Eyl (2012, 3-19).

19 On this particular, see Kartzow (2018).

20 Though from the Latin version of the *ATh*, this topic has been already studied in Rose (2016).

In general terms and neutrally, Thomas is referred to as a foreigner by different characters (Marcia in *ATH* 120; Mygdonia in *ATH* 123; Tertia in *ATH* 136, and 137; Mnesara in *ATH* 154). Moreover, this aspect of his profile is even emphasized by Thomas himself in various passages where he acknowledges his foreignness, typically associated with other aspects indicating that the former is observed by the apostle himself as a negative condition, which would agree with his initial reluctance in *ATH* 1 to accept the apostolic mission in India. Both in *ATH* 136, where he presents himself to Tertia as a poor, despicable, and beggarly foreigner, without riches or possessions (ξένον ἄνθρωπον καὶ πένητα καὶ εὐκαταφρόνητον καὶ πτωχόν, μήτε πλοῦτον ἔχοντα μήτε κτήσιν), and in *ATH* 145, where he continues in the same vein as in the previous passage and adds the hardships of the prison in which he was held (ἰδοὺ τοιγαροῦν ἐπλήρωσά σου τὸ ἔργον καὶ τὸ πρόσταγμα ἐτελείωσα· καὶ γέγονα πένης καὶ ἐνδεῆς καὶ ξένος καὶ δοῦλος καὶ καταπεφρονημένος καὶ δεσμώτης καὶ λιμώττων καὶ διψῶν καὶ γυμνὸς καὶ κεκοπιακῶς), the apostle Thomas insists on defining himself as a foreigner because of the preaching of the word of God.

Of particular interest, both for their quantity and nature, are the interventions of Charisius, the main antagonist of Thomas in the text, in this regard. In total, four occasions can be counted where the term ξένος is uttered by Charisius (*ATH* 95, 99, 100, and 101). In my view, in the first of the passages mentioned, the term ξένος is used in a somewhat derogatory sense, particularly due to the emphatic force of the demonstrative ἐκεῖνος and to the context of increasing dramatic tension in which it is embedded. Firstly, it is Charisius's slave, whom he asks about the whereabouts of his wife Mygdonia, who uses this formula to refer to Thomas. Then, in the conversation between Charisius and his wife in the same chapter (*ATH* 95), the former repeats the words of the slave when asking Mygdonia if Thomas was a physician (Ἐκεῖνος ὁ ξένος ἱατρός ἐστιν;).

Mygdonia's response affirming that he was a physician of souls (ἱατρός ἐστὶν ψυχῶν) enrages Charisius and provokes an escalation of tension between them, leading to the scene of gender violence that they enact (Dell'Isola 2022, 107-120). In addition, even the crowd is somewhat forced to pronounce such an accusation against the apostle, as it is stated in *ATH* 106 (τὸν βασιλέα ὕβρισεν καὶ πλάνος ἐστὶν ὁ ξένος), in a formulation in which is used the term πλάνος, which can be interpreted in the sense of 'wandering', but also highlighting somehow the itinerant nature of the apostle, as this word also means 'vagabond'.

In the case of the *AJ* and the *MPet*, the vocabulary related to the apostle's foreign status is much less explicit. In fact, there are no references to it as there are in the three other apocryphal acts of the apostles analysed in this article.

As has been noted, the term ξένος is generally employed with negative connotations to define the nature or activity of the apostles, who are portrayed as itinerant evangelizers. Like the sophists, they travel from city to city and are perceived as harmful by opposing local groups, philosophers in the case of the sophists, and non-Christian individuals in the case of the apostles. Both, however, are received within the cities in which their activities take place by members of the local community, who are, in principle, affected by their words and actions. In this regard, Mygdonia's reference to Thomas as a 'physician of souls' (*ATH* 95) highlights the impact of the apostle's teaching upon the inner life of his followers, an influence interpreted negatively by non-initiated social groups. Similarly, the negative characterization of the sophists in Plato's *Sophist* consistently emphasizes the harmful effects of their activity upon the souls of those they influence. The case of the *Acts of Thomas* represents something of an exception, since here the term ξένος, when used by the apostle, does not have negative implications, but serves a different purpose: it merely acknowledges that he is a stranger

in India, due to both geographical and social circumstances.

3. RHETORICAL ABILITY, MIRACLES, AND MAGIC OF THE APOSTLES

In both the case of the sophists in Plato and the apostles in their apocryphal acts, their great rhetorical capacity is highlighted, enabling them to attract the masses and effectively transmit their teachings. In the *Sophist*, the stranger defines the sophists as expert refuters and skilful speakers who manage, in a certain way, to amaze the crowds, leading them to be considered almost as illusionists or magicians (Bernabé 2013, 53-55). Plato's definition of the sophists emphasizes the association of their activities with the realm of θαῦμα (*Soph.* 233a-b). Furthermore, two passages from the *Protagoras* (315a, 316d) illustrate how the sophists enchant their audience through their oratory, in a manner comparable to Orpheus in myth.

Regarding the interpretation of the preaching activity of the apostles and their miracles in cities where their inhabitants were not familiar with Christian doctrine, are interpreted in a negative sense, as magic and harmful to the people under the influence of the apostle. The combination of the journey motif and the accusation of magic in the portrayal of the apostles reveals the basic characteristics of the itinerant magician, the most common type of sorcerer in the literary sources from the imperial period in which the origin of these apocryphal Acts of the Apostles is situated (Dickie 2001, 216-221). The use of a similar metaphorical vocabulary related to wonder-working and magic in Plato's *Sophist* to describe the activities of the sophists reveals the deployment of the very same literary pattern already attested in Classical literature.

Furthermore, to the extent that they manage to attract the masses and create a certain community of followers and faithful individuals, they become teachers (διδάσκαλοι) in the purest philosophical sense of the term.

Obviously, the use of the term διδάσκαλος applied to Jesus²¹, as it appears in the canonical texts, would serve as a point of adaptation of this word and concept to the Christian context, especially within the framework of the early expansion of Christianity in these first centuries of our era.

Poupon (1981), in his seminal study on the accusation of magic in the apocryphal acts, already highlighted the use of a restricted lexical repertoire to refer to the apostles in these apocryphal acts, which was usually inserted into speeches by non-Christian characters. Among the terms he gathered, he placed among the most common μάγος, φάρμακος, and γόης, while in a second category he included others semantically related to the first ones such as ἐπώδός, περιέργος, or πλάνος. Within the first group, he defined the first term (μάγος) as 'le magicien avec son pouvoir occulte et donc redoutable'; the second term (φάρμακος) as 'le sorcier, le faiseur de potions empoisonnées ou de philtres amoureux'; and the third term (γόης) as 'le charlatan vivant d'expédients et de bohème.' In the second group, he considered that ἐπώδός alludes to the magical procedure of enchantment, the second term (περιέργος) would mean 'en mauvaise part intrigant, adonné à la magie' in a negative sense, and the third term (πλάνος) would maintain a less direct relationship with the sphere of magic and enchantment (Poupon 1981, 71-72).

Among all these terms, the use of the term γόης seems particularly significant due to its coincidence in both Plato's *Sophist* and the apocryphal Acts. Moreover, according to Poupon, it carries an implicit reference to the itinerant, bohemian character of the apostle, which is also applicable to the typical portrayal of the sophists. Precisely, the use of the term in Plato's text occurs particularly recurrently in 235a-b, where the sophist is considered an illusionist (γόης) and an imitator (μιμητής), and a little further on as a miracle worker (θαυματοποιός) due to the almost magical and

21 On the function of Jesus as teacher, see, among others: Byrskog (1994) and Witmer (2008).

illusory nature that emerges from his rhetorical action. In the case of the apostles, there is an obvious relationship between the performance of miracles and their interpretation as acts of magic by non-Christian characters. Additionally, Poupon pointed to the close relationship between these accusations made against the apostles and the preaching of chastity (Poupon 1981, 73). In reality, one could rather point to the relationship between the accusation of magic and preaching in general, since chastity is part of the content transmitted in the preaching context through which the apostle manages to convey his message. The true 'magic' -as perceived by non-Christian characters- lies primarily in the apostle's ability to perform miracles, but also in his enormous rhetorical skill, capable of being convincing to the audience, converting them, and even changing their lifestyle. The apostle possesses a charisma that makes him seen in this way by his opponents, who are unable to explain why he is successful in the social context in which they find themselves. The explanation for both their great thaumaturgical power and their charm and rhetorical skill lies, in fact, in the grace of God granted to the apostle. The texts repeatedly emphasize this point in order to refute the accusations of magic made against the Christian protagonists (Bovon 2001, 275-277).

In the AA this relationship between rhetorical skill, magic, and the performance of miracles is hinted at in the aforementioned passages of AA 25 and 51. In the first one, a servant informs the proconsul Aegeates about the apostle, emphasizing his foreign status, his healings, and the preaching of his religion as the true one. In the second, Aegeates boasts to Andrew about his imminent condemnation to death. In his words, one can sense how, in this case, the persecution of the apostle is directly related to the change brought about in Maximilla after her conversion. The focus is clearly placed on the choice of chastity²², which

has typically attracted the attention of feminist scholars in the analysis of these texts²³. In our case, it is interesting to examine the use of language of AA 51 and how the author of the AA employs the verb ὑποδιαφθείρω to describe the effect of Andrew's preaching on the soul of his beloved Maximilla, stating that he had 'corrupted' her to the point of her deciding to separate from him and not to please him as she used (πάλαι ἀρεσκομένην μοι). In this discourse, Aegeates himself emphasizes the social effect of the apostle's intervention in the context of Roman society at the time, in socio-political terms, by pointing out that he had intruded into places that were foreign to him (εἰσπηδήσαι ἀλλοτρίοις τόποις)²⁴.

The AJ is probably the text in which these elements are least explored, probably since there is no clear confrontation with non-Christian authorities, and the narrative does not lead, as in the other cases, towards the condemnation and martyrdom of the apostle (Junod and Kaestli 1983, 564-580)²⁵. However, the text clearly depicts a sequence in which both the apostle's miracles and his speeches stand out, often linked together. In this sequence, miracles serve to provoke or ensure the conversion of non-Christians, while speeches are used to teach them the content of the word of God and deepen their knowledge. For this reason, his profile as a teacher (διδάσκαλος), following to some extent the parameters of a certain *imitatio Christi*, is of particular relevance. This aspect is emphasized particularly clearly in the mention of the disciples who accompanied John on his definitive return to Ephesus in AJ 59 (Andronicus, Drusiana, Lycomedes, Cleobius, and their companions; Aristobulus, Xenophon, a repentant prostitute, and many

142-145.

²³ See i.e. the works of Davies (1983), Burrus (1987) or Levine and Robbins (2006).

²⁴ As it was suggested by one of the reviewers of the article, Aegeates' accusation is trustworthy within the social context of the time, when ritual acts of an erotic nature were performed to break up couples. Cf. Faraone (2001) and Flint (1999).

²⁵ On John's death, see Junod and Kaestli 1983b, 564-580.

²² On the role played in the text by Aegeates during the conversion of Maximilla, see Roig Lanzillotta 2007,

others), or in the ritual performed in the last Eucharist he celebrates with his community of believers and his farewell to them in *AJ* 109-111, just before his final speech before dying.

As in the *AA*, the accusation formulated against Peter in the *MP* pertains to the conversion and chastity of a group of noble women who ultimately renounce their husbands. This is at least how it is presented in *MP* 34, where the appreciation of Peter's discourse on chastity is linked to the abandonment of husbands, triggering the reaction of Albinus and Agrippa to denounce the apostle to the city authorities. Once again, the social implications of the apostle's preaching are highlighted in the same chapter in Albinus's words, who urges Agrippa to make away with Peter for being a magician (ὡς περιεργὸν ἄνδρα ἀνέλωμεν), to reclaim their wives (ὅπως ἔξωμεν ἡμῶν τὰς γυναῖκας), and furthermore, in order that they may also avenge those men who have not been able to do away with him (ἵνα κάκεινους ἐκδικήσωμεν τοὺς μὴ δυναμένους αὐτὸν ἀνελεῖν). In this text the question of magic is of particular interest because of the rivalry and contest described in the section preserved in the *AV* between Peter and Simon Magus²⁶, who is characterized in the text as a coward, a deceiver, and a fraud, in contrast with the apostle Peter. This initial part of the text shows the tension between magic and miracle as ambivalent considerations depending on the point of view of the narrative voice and its interests and beliefs²⁷.

In the *APTh*, the relationship between the apostle's preaching, the conversions it provokes –especially in the case of Thecla– and its interpretation by non-Christian characters as acts of magic is a constant theme that is significantly emphasized in the first part of the narrative (Barrier 2009, 108). This section concludes with Thecla's first martyrdom in Iconium and her subsequent liberation following various divine interventions, such as

the fire that does not touch her, the hailstorm, and the earthquake that shakes the theatre.

From a narrative standpoint, the *APTh* employs the same strategies observed in other apocryphal texts to associate the apostle's preaching with magic. The importance of the apostle's rhetorical skill is highlighted in two fundamental scenes. The first is the discourse of the beatitudes delivered at the house of Onesiphorus (*APTh* 5-6), which effectively converts a large group of women in Iconium, including Thecla who listens to the discourse from her window. The second scene occurs in the discourse delivered before the proconsul of Iconium in *APTh* 17, which also features a variety of stylistic and rhetorical devices typical of forensic oratory tradition.

In addition to Theocleia's description of Paul's activities to Thamyris in *APTh* 8, in *APTh* 15, Thamyris explicitly accuses Paul of corrupting both the city of the Iconians and Thecla by persuading her to reject marriage (διέφθειρας τὴν Ἰκονιέων πόλιν καὶ τὴν ἡρμοσμένην μοι, ἵνα μὴ θελήσῃ με), while the crowd directly accuses Paul of being a magician and, following Thamyris's argument, of corrupting all the women of the city (ἀπάγαγε τὸν μάγον· διέφθειρεν γὰρ ἡμῶν πάσας τὰς γυναῖκας). Later on, once again the crowd will repeat their accusation of magic against Paul (*APTh* 20: μάγος ἐστίν, αἶρε αὐτόν). In this regard, Jacobs argues that the apostle is perceived by Theocleia, Thecla's mother, Thamyris and the rest of non-Christian inhabitants of Iconium as a homewrecker and interprets Thecla's renunciation from a social perspective as a rupture with the traditional family model prevalent in the high society of the empire at that time (Jacobs 1999, 105-107). Thus, the rejection of marriage is symbolically understood as a deconstruction of the usual social models accepted by all (Jacobs 2006).

In the *ATh*, various sections of the narrative demonstrate the relationship between rhetorical or thaumaturgic ability and the interpretation as magic of the apostle's activities. As usual, his intervention in social

26 On the narrative portrait of Simon Magus on this text, see Luttkhuizen (1998).

27 On this topic, see Van Pelt 2021, 64-65, 69-72.

scenes and the conversions he provokes, typically targeting specific groups such as women or youths, are highlighted. Following the chronological sequence of the *ATH*, the first significant episode would be the weddings in Andrapolis, the second the construction of the palace in the heavens for King Goundaphor, and the third the extensive section dedicated to the conversion of the noble Mygdonia or the Indian queen Tertia, where once again situations previously discussed regarding the other texts comprising these main apocryphal acts occur. These episodes are also among the most frequently attested in the manuscript tradition of the text.

In the episode of the weddings of Andrapolis (*ATH* 3-16), there is a narrative novelty compared to the rest of the apocryphal acts. In this case, thanks to the miracle and the warnings from the flute player that Thomas had certain capabilities bordering on the divine, the king, the highest local authority, forces Thomas to spend time with his newlywed daughter and her husband in the bridal chamber. After his speech, the appearance of Jesus in the chamber reserved for the young couple, and their definitive conversion, in *ATH* 16 the king orders a search for the apostle throughout the city, considering him a calamity for the city (συλλαβόντες φέρετέ μοι ἐκεῖνον τὸν ἄνδρα τὸν φαρμακὸν τὸν κακῶς παρατυχόντα ἐν τῇ πόλει ταύτῃ), and laments having introduced him into his house with his own hands (ἐγὼ γὰρ εἰσήγαγον αὐτὸν ἰδίαις χερσίν εἰς τὸν οἶκόν μου, καὶ ἐγὼ εἶπον αὐτῷ ἵνα εὕξηται ἐπι τῇ ἀτυχεστάτῃ μου θυγατρὶ).

In the case of the second act of Thomas (*ATH* 17-30), which narrates the story of the construction of the palace in the heavens for King Goundaphor by Thomas²⁸, the focus should be on the description given by the king's friends of the apostle's activities. On one hand, they emphasize in *ATH* 20 the itinerant nature of his apostolic activity, stating that he

went among the cities and the countryside distributing everything he had among the poor (περιέρχεται τὰς πόλεις καὶ τὰς χώρας, καὶ εἴ τι ἔχει πάντα δίδωσι τοῖς πένησι). Additionally, they highlight his preaching, as he taught about a new god (καὶ διδάσκει θεὸν νέον ἕνα), besides healing the sick, casting out demons, and performing other incredible things (καὶ νοσοῦντας θεραπεύει καὶ δαίμονας ἀπελαύνει καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ ποιεῖ παράδοξα). At the same time, the king's friends express doubts about the nature of the apostle. They claim to believe that he is a magician (καὶ νομίζομεν ἡμεῖς ὅτι μάγος ἐστίν), but his acts of charity, his simplicity, and his asceticism make them doubt, so they consider him a just man or a messenger from the new god about whom he preaches (δίκαιός ἐστιν ἢ ἀπόστολος τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ νέου ὃν αὐτὸς καταγγέλλει)²⁹, thus emphasizing not only his rhetorical and persuasive ability, as in previous cases, but above all, his actions. In the same episode, in *ATH* 21 Gad, the brother of the king, will again call Thomas a magician (μάγος) before his death and resurrection provokes the definitive conversion of both him and his brother. They come to understand that Thomas had done all of this for them, with the aim of saving their souls and reserving a privileged place for them in the afterlife.

Finally, in the extensive section dedicated to the conversion of both Mygdonia and Tertia (*ATH* 82-149), which ultimately leads to Thomas's martyrdom (*ATH* 150-171), is where the accusation of magic against the apostle is most clearly observed. In general, the text uses a recurring vocabulary that labels Thomas as a magician (μάγος in *ATH* 101, 104, 116, 138, 162²; φάρμακος in *ATH* 99, 114, 117, 123) or resorts to verbs and expressions that emphasize the perception of the effects caused by the apostle's preaching as something magic (Misdeus in *ATH* 138: ἐφαρμάκευσεν τὴν Τερτίαν; Jailers in *ATH*

29 In the words of a non-Christian character, it would not be correct to interpret the term ἀπόστολος in the technical sense it acquires within the Christian language, but rather in a more general sense as a 'messenger' (*LSJ*, s.v. ἀπόστολος).

28 Hilhorst's consideration as a 'pious fraud' is still a valid a descriptive label of this scene (Hilhorst 2001, 57-58). See a recent analysis of the scene in Grau (2024).

162: ὅτι τέχνη μαγικῆ ἀνέφξεν τὰς θύρας τοῦ δεσμοτηρίου), supernatural (Charisius in *ATH* 100: βάσκανος δὲ ὀφθαλμὸς ἀφήρπασέν σε ἀπ' ἐμοῦ), mad (Charisius in *ATH* 99: καὶ τάχα ἐμμανῆς γενομένη ὑπὸ τοῦ φαρμακοῦ ἐκείνου μανεῖσα εἰς τὴν ἀγορὰν ἐξήλθεν ζητοῦσα ἐκεῖνον; and in *ATH* 114: τίς ἢ τοσαύτη σου μανία;), and harmful.

Among all the non-Christian characters affected by the conversions of Thomas, Charisius emerges as a clear antagonist to the apostle. The words of the former describe how the preaching of the apostle, his message, his ascetic attitude, his miracles, or his conversions were interpreted from a non-Christian perspective, opposed to the new religion. The main reason for his aggressive behaviour is the fact that he is deprived of the attention and love of his wife Mygdonia³⁰, who follows in the footsteps of other women in these apocryphal acts by renouncing marriage due to conversion, which bears great similarity to the story of Thecla (Narro 2021, 242-252). In his initial intervention in this regard (*ATH* 96), his focus is on denouncing the use of deceptive and futile words (μὴ πλανῶ λόγοις ἀπατηλοῖς καὶ ματαίοις) and the employment of magical arts by Thomas (μηδὲ τοῖς ἔργοις τῆς μαγείας), in reference to the resurrections he had previously performed in the text.

Gradually, Charisius's interventions play with the scale of values that he, ignorant of the spiritual and celestial world preached by the apostle, defends from his perspective as a non-Christian, focused solely on worldly goods and qualities typical of the social context in which he finds himself, such as his wife, his home, his nobility, or his power. In very similar terms to how Aegeates referred to the apostle Andrew in *AA* 51 Charisius addresses Thomas in *ATH* 106, as he accuses the apostle of being a wicked man, destroyer and enemy of his house (πονηρὸ καὶ ἀφανιστὰ καὶ ἐχθρὸ τοῦ ἐμοῦ οἴκου).

More and more clearly, his interventions are aimed at his own interest and at trying to change Mygdonia's mind, echoing arguments like those already used in previous interventions, always guided by that material scale of values. Thus, for example, in *ATH* 116 he claims to Mygdonia that he is better than Thomas, whom he describes as a magician (μάγος), or in *ATH* 123, he insists on how Thomas, defined as a 'sorcerer' (φάρμακος), brings no benefit whatsoever, nor is he capable of fulfilling what he promises (ἐπ' ἐκείνῳ τῷ φαρμακῷ οὐδὲν ἐστὶν ὄφελος, καὶ ὅσα ἐπαγγέλλεται πράττειν οὐ δύναται). However, his concern is not simply about losing his wife; it also has certain social implications or consequences, as Charisius is also worried about becoming a source of disgrace among the Indians (*ATH* 117: μὴ οὖν ἀντὶ μηδενὸς θῆς τοὺς ἐμοὺς λόγους καὶ ποιήσης με ὄνειδος ἐν τοῖς Ἰνδοῖς), as his honour is being compromised.

Finally, during the various phases of the interrogation and judicial process carried out against Thomas by King Misdus, other formulations are found that insist on this characterization of the apostle. Firstly, as also occurred in the *APTh*, Misdus inquires about the apostle's preaching and refers to it as 'a new doctrine, hated by gods and men, which contains nothing useful' (*ATH* 126: διὰ τί τὴν νέαν ταύτην διδάσκεις διδασκαλίαν, ἣν θεοὶ τε μισοῦσιν καὶ ἄνθρωποι, οὐδὲν ἔχουσα χρῆσιμον;). Secondly, once again, the verb διαφθεῖρω is used to describe the harmful effects of the apostle's preaching, in this passage labelled anew as 'sorcerer' (φάρμακος) by King Misdus himself in his lament to his friend Charisius in *ATH* 138 (διὰ τί με οὐ συνεχώρησας ἀπολέσαι ἐκεῖνον τὸν φαρμακὸν πρὶν τὸν ἐμὸν οἶκον τῆ ἑαυτοῦ ἀμαρτία διαφθεῖραι;).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the analysis, we have delved into the striking parallels between the portrayal

30 On the relationship between Charisius and Mygdonia and the presence in this narrative sequence of certain details echoing some *tópoi* of the Greek rhetorical and philosophical tradition, see Bremmer 2001, 83-86.

of the apostles in the apocryphal acts and the characterization of the sophists and in Platonic literature. The use of a similar strategy of characterization for both sophists and apostles reveals a conscious selection of specific literary and linguistic elements belonging to a narrative framework of conflict between two social groups. This conflict arises because the activities and/or words of one of the groups involved (sophists and apostles), who are also portrayed as foreigners and outsiders in relation to the second group (philosophers/Athenian citizens and non-Christians) and are perceived as causing harm to part of the latter. This affected group is represented primarily by young people in the case of the sophists and by women in the case of the apostles, both considered by their respective communities as particularly vulnerable to external influence. In this context, the Stranger in Plato's *Sophist* and non-Christian characters in the apocryphal Acts emphasize the rhetorical prowess and the allegedly magical abilities of their opponents.

The capacity to use speech to persuade (in the case of the sophists) or to convert (in the case of the apostles) is described by those who view their actions and intentions as immoral or dangerous, as a form of manipulation or even enchantment. The use of terminology associated with wonder-working or magic may be metaphorical in Plato's *Sophist*, but it carries more substantial implications in the apocryphal Acts, where miraculous deeds can be interpreted either as evidence of the apostle's moral and religious authority by Christian believers, or as immoral and harmful acts by non-Christian observers who are not yet familiar with or initiated into the new doctrine. Furthermore, both groups are accused of undermining established social norms, an accusation that ultimately concerns the transformation of the minds and souls of those directly influenced (young Athenian citizens in the case of the sophists, and, more specifically, women in the case of the apostles). The adaptation of this general pattern to different contexts is particularly evident in

the apocryphal Acts, where the negative consequences are primarily associated with issues of chastity and marriage, whereas in the case of the sophists, the alleged harm remains within a broader moral and ethical framework.

The perceived aggressiveness of both sophists and apostles by their opponents is also reflected in the vocabulary used to describe them, even if the metaphors differ. While Plato's *Sophist* frequently employs the imagery of hunting (220a–223b), the apocryphal Acts consistently emphasize the association with magic and the itinerant lifestyle of the apostles. Both elements evoke widespread prejudices concerning the potentially disruptive and coercive nature of their influence, which is further underscored by the use of verbs such as διαφθείρω ('to corrupt' or 'to destroy'), highlighting the supposedly devastating effects of their actions on those who come under their influence.

At this point, three main questions arise from the discussion thus far. 1) First, what might account for the connection between the characterization of these two figures, namely the sophists and the apostles? 2) Second, how can the chronological gap of approximately five centuries between Plato and the apocryphal Acts be explained? 3) Third, why is this comparison particularly significant, as opposed to other possible similarities that might be identified between different textual corpora? The following final paragraphs aim to address these questions in a systematic manner.

The linguistic and literary parallels identified in the preceding pages underscore the use of similar patterns of characterization in both the Platonic portrayal of the sophists and the depiction of the apostles in early Christian texts. This convergence may be explained either by the direct influence of Platonic dialogues –particularly the *Sophist*– on the construction of characters in the apocryphal Acts, by the use of pre-established literary patterns for the depiction of negatively perceived figures in Graeco-Roman literature,

or, more plausibly, by a combination of both factors. On the one hand, direct influence from Platonic texts on the rhetoric of the apocryphal Acts cannot be ruled out, although it remains difficult to identify specific sources with certainty. While direct quotations from the Old and New Testament allow for clearer lines of transmission,³¹ the identification of classical influences often relies on more elusive echoes and parallels, a matter that continues to be debated, particularly in a *corpus* that has not yet been systematically examined from a fully philological and linguistic perspective,³² including broader comparison with Classical and Graeco-Roman literature beyond the novel.

On the other hand, the most convincing explanation lies in the shared use of established narrative patterns for the characterization of figures perceived as socially or morally problematic. The texts describing both sophists and apostles belong to the same wider Graeco-Roman literary tradition and, to some extent, reflect overlapping philosophical concerns and ethical frameworks (Junod 1981). The influence of the Greek novel on the narrative structure of the apocryphal Acts is widely acknowledged,³³ and scholars have also identified the presence of recurrent literary *topoi* common to other genres of the first two centuries CE, such as biography and paradoxographical literature (Miralles 1996). Within this context, the adoption of a recognizable pattern for portraying negatively perceived figures, such as that observed in the descriptions of both sophists and apostles, appears entirely plausible. In my view, these two explanations –shared literary tradition and possible direct Platonic influence– are not incompatible; rather, their combination

provides the most satisfactory account and offers a basis for addressing the remaining questions.

Plato's works were widely known throughout the Imperial period, and both Christian and non-Christian audiences were familiar with the language, forms, and ideas of classical philosophical prose.³⁴ It should also be recalled that the apocryphal Acts are generally understood to have been composed for a diverse readership: not only for committed Christians already acquainted with the theological and ethical concepts conveyed in these texts, but also for potential non-Christian readers who might be drawn toward conversion.³⁵ These cultural factors help to explain why the authors of the apocryphal Acts made use of narrative elements inherited from the Greek rhetorical and literary tradition in shaping the portrayal of the apostles, particularly in passages where non-Christian characters present their activities as threatening or subversive. This is especially evident in the better-preserved texts, such as the *Acts of Andrew (AA)*, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla (APTh)*, and the *Acts of Thomas (ATh)*. By situating the apostles within recognizable cultural and literary frameworks, these authors sought both to render their message intelligible to audiences shaped by Greco-Roman traditions and to articulate a distinctly Christian perspective on rhetoric, morality, and religious authority.

From this perspective, the comparison between sophists and apostles remains, to some extent, paradoxical, as it ultimately serves a specific narrative purpose: to highlight the error of those non-Christian characters who perceive the apostles as negative figures. The reader, however, is fully aware that the apostles' intentions are just, benevolent, and ethically sound. Thus, while the narrative adopts the viewpoint of hostile observers, it simultaneously undermines it, making clear that such judgments are misguided. Unlike

31 See, for example, Karasson (1995) for the Old Testament quotations in the apocryphal Acts.

32 See further discussion about this topic in Zacharides-Holmberg (1999) and Warren (1999). However, there is a systematic linguistic study on the *Acts of Peter and Paul* (Artés, 1999).

33 See, for example, von Dobschutz (1902), Del Cerro (1993) or Pervo (2003).

34 See, for example, the basic work of Jagger (1961) or Sierksma-Agteres (2024), among many others.

35 I follow here the ideas of Bremmer 2001, 149-70.

the sophists –at least as they are portrayed in Platonic discourse– the apostles are not presented as genuinely harmful figures; rather, the apparent similarity between them operates within a broader moral and ethical debate.

The significance of this comparison, as opposed to other possible parallels between different textual *corpora*, lies both at a macrostructural and a microstructural level. At the macrostructural level, both groups (sophists and apostles) are presented as clearly identifiable social categories, placed within a context of conflict between an itinerant, external group and a local community that perceives them as a threat to established moral, ethical, and social norms. At the microstructural level, the comparison is grounded in specific narrative and linguistic features that shape their negative portrayal, particularly their itinerant nature and the association between rhetorical skill and forms of magic or enchantment used to persuade vulnerable members of the community.

The convergence of these two levels – macrostructural and microstructural– is essential for establishing a meaningful comparison between distinct groups of narrative characters. The present study focuses on sophists and apostles precisely because they exhibit this combination of features in a particularly clear and consistent manner. While this does not exclude the possibility of identifying similar patterns in other textual *corpora* (novel, biography), it is difficult to point to other cases in which both the broader narrative framework and the specific strategies of characterization align so closely. Further exploration of such parallels would require a broader study that goes beyond the scope of the present work, which is intended as a contribution to defining the basic elements of narrative comparison and, more specifically, to situating the apocryphal Acts more precisely within the context of Imperial Greek literature, while encouraging future research along these lines.

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Ángel Narro: Conceptualization, formal analysis, methodology, investigation, writing, review, and editing.