1. *The apocryphal Acts of the apostles: rejected or rooted?*

The relation between apocrypha and the liturgical cult of saints is a matter that attracted the attention of one of the most famous collectors of hagiographic material of the modern era. It was in the early 17th century that the Dutch priest Héribert Rosweyde uttered his surprise at the many apocryphal stories he was confronted with in the daily practice of reading the lives of the saints in the liturgy of the hours. His amazement at the liturgical use of these stories, ‘the orthodoxy of which might often well be questioned’, became the main incentive to start the collection and edition of saints’ legends for the cycle of the liturgical year that became well known as the *Acta Sanctorum*.

From the early Christian centuries onwards and throughout the medieval period, the approach to extra-biblical, or apocryphal, traditions on biblical saints in relation to the cult of these saints in practices of public worship, or liturgy, has by no means been straightforward or unequivocal. Concentrating on the case of the apostles, we find sharp denunciation of extra-canonical writings on the Twelve, particularly in a liturgical setting, side by side with a keen reception of these apocryphal traditions in many aspects of veneration of the apostles, be it in pictorial or textual expression. In the words of Averil Cameron, ‘[o]fficially recognized or not, it was this body of material [sc. the apocryphal Acts and Gospels] on which later generations of preachers dwelt so often and so lovingly’.2

---


But not only the historical testimonies on the reception and use of apocryphal traditions in the liturgical practice of the early Christian and medieval period are multicoloured. Modern scholarship concerned with the relation between apocrypha and liturgy is entangled in a set of questions, which have to be cautiously unravelled in order to come to a balanced view of the matter. When Rosweyde raised his eyebrows over the occurrence of apocryphal material in the liturgy of his daily practice, he did so from the perspective of his time. The early 17th century had lived through the decades of reform in both the Catholic and the young reformed churches and had witnessed a renewed interest in the study of the Bible and ecclesiastical writings. In the field of liturgy, the Roman Catholic church had just introduced the reformed Roman Missal of Trent. Needless to say, Rosweyde’s perception of apocrypha and liturgy was not necessarily the same as a medieval one.

When studying the medieval reception of apocrypha, it is important to discern the influence of contemporary definitions of and approaches to these matters. Modern approaches to apocrypha and hagiography, liturgy and related themes, must be understood in order to answer the question raised in this book: the relation between apocrypha and liturgy in the medieval West. In the following introductory sections, both medieval and modern voices are heard, and it will become clear that they need to be heard in stereo.

When we consider the use of apocryphal traditions in forms of public worship of the church, attention is easily drawn to prescriptive sources of the early Christian and early medieval period that give evidence of a tendency to handle extra-canonical writings with caution. Various apocryphal writings are mentioned in this context, among which are the *Acta* of individual apostles, composed in the 2nd and 3rd centuries and disseminated in different parts of the Christian world but not received as part of the Bible. The association of these apocryphal Acts with heretical persons or groups, such as the Manichaeans, or the Priscillianists in Spain, explains the endeavours from the side of ecclesiastical authorities to keep them away from the Christian community as far as possible. In the western church, particularly strict regulation was