

# THE APOSTOLIC DECREE AND ITS SETTING IN THE ANCIENT CHURCH<sup>1</sup>

By MARCEL SIMON

PROFESSOR OF THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF STRASBOURG

THE purpose of this paper is to examine some of the problems raised by the so called Apostolic Decree (Acts of the Apostles xv. 23-29). Although they have already been abundantly discussed, it seems to me that more light can still be shed on this vexed question, all the more as new aspects have been underlined in a series of recent publications which I shall take into account.

It is hardly necessary to insist upon the circumstances under which the Decree was issued. Some Jewish Christians made an attempt to convince the Gentile Christians that they must by all means accept circumcision, and the whole Law of Moses. Paul and Barnabas submit the problem to the Jerusalem Church which, at the initiative of Peter and James, disavows those Jewish Christians and decides that nothing more must be imposed upon the Gentiles than this: "That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication" (Acts xv. 29).

Whether or not the account given by Acts of what is sometimes called the Jerusalem Council can be trusted is a question which I cannot examine in the course of one short lecture. I am concerned only with the Decree itself, the authenticity of which cannot, in my opinion, be seriously questioned. The discussions to which it has given place concern both its exact meaning and its precise wording.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Manson Memorial lecture 1969 delivered in the University of Manchester on Tuesday, the 21st of October 1969.

<sup>2</sup> On the Council of Jerusalem, Kirsopp Lake "The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem", in F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, v (London, 1933), 195-212; M. Goguel, *The Birth of Christianity*, Engl. transl. (London, 1953), pp. 298 ff.; John C. Hurd, *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (London, 1965), pp. 246-53 (good bibliography); among the numerous Commentaries on Acts, cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London, 1951), pp. 287 ff.; *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (London-Edinburgh, 1954), pp. 298 ff.

It is a well known fact that the textual tradition of this passage of Acts has come down to us with such variants as to change fundamentally the meaning of the document if we follow one reading or the other. In particular, the so-called Western text does not mention the things strangled (*πνικτόν*) and adds to the other three prohibitions what is commonly known as the Golden Rule in its negative form: "Abstain from doing to others what you would not like done to yourselves".<sup>1</sup> This addition gives the whole document a very clear meaning. It presents it as an ethical code, which forbids idolatry, sexual immorality, homicide and, more generally, whatever is harmful to one's neighbour. The word *haima* thus applies to the shedding of human blood, *eidolothya* is considered as synonymous with idolatry, and *porneia* is understood in its most general meaning of dissolute living. It is only normal that the mention of things strangled should disappear altogether from such a context.

A number of scholars, among them such a distinguished one as Harnack,<sup>2</sup> have held, and some still hold, this ethical interpretation of the Decree to be the only legitimate one.<sup>3</sup> It rests, in my opinion, on a complete misunderstanding of the situation from which the Decree arose. The question which the Apostles are facing and to which the Decree provides an answer is not to tell the Gentile Christians what rule of life they have to obey in order to be saved—though, according to Acts xv. 1, the extreme Jewish Christians do indeed pose the problem in these terms—it is, more simply, to decide under what conditions they will be admitted to full religious fellowship with their brethren of Jewish birth. And it is *a priori* likely that these conditions should be of a ceremonial character. If the problem were an ethical one, it could be settled by a simple reference to the Decalogue. It is clear, at least to me, that the Golden Rule has been superadded to the Decree, while on the other hand the

<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 299-300.

<sup>2</sup> A. Harnack, *New Testament Studies*, III: *The Acts of the Apostles*, English transl. (London, 1909), pp. 248-63.

<sup>3</sup> This thesis has been recently developed again by Th. Boman, "Das textkritische Problem des sogenannten Aposteldekrets", *Novum Testamentum*, 1964, pp. 26 ff.

word *pnikton* was cancelled, at a time when it was no longer possible to imagine that levitical regulations, even in a mitigated form, could ever have been enforced on Gentile Christians. There can therefore be little doubt that the Apostolic Decree is not a code of ethics.

It has sometimes been maintained, amongst others, quite recently, by John C. Hurd, that the Decree represents "a combination of ethical and dietary regulations".<sup>1</sup> Although this is not to be excluded *a priori*, it must however be noted that the parallels produced by Hurd, and taken from the so-called Noachian commands as found in the rabbinical literature, from the Sibylline Oracles and from the decisions of the rabbinic Council of Lydda (*circa* A.D. 135) appear, on closer examination, inconclusive.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the context of the Decree does not support an ethico-ritual interpretation: "it seemed good", says the document, "to the Holy Ghost and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things". It is difficult to believe that such a restriction should apply to ethical commandments and that three of them only (if we accept the purely ethical interpretation), one of them only, *porneia* (if we follow Hurd), should have been retained, and not, amongst others, lies and theft, which would thus be implicitly permitted.

There exists however, in my opinion, a connection between the Apostolic Decree and the Noachian commands mentioned by Hurd. These were, according to Genesis ix. 3-6, imposed upon Noah, father of all human races, as a very brief and simple code of rules, both ritual and ethical; mankind is allowed to eat of "every moving thing that liveth", with one exception only: "Flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof,

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* pp. 252-3.

<sup>2</sup> On the decisions of Lydda, *b. Shabbath*, 7b; *b. Sanhedrin*, 74a; cf. the remarks of W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 56-57; also J. W. Hunkin, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1926, pp. 272-83. According to Hurd "the Decree appears to be one example of a class of traditional formulations of conduct which no Jew might transgress even if his life were at stake and which, conversely, each Gentile must obey if he is to enjoy social contact with the Jews" (*loc cit.*). This is certainly wrong: the first part of the sentence applies to the decisions of Lydda, the second to the Apostolic Decree, and the two documents do not overlap, for they correspond to two completely different situations.

shall ye not eat." Along with this prohibition to eat blood of slaughtered animals goes a prohibition to shed human blood: "And surely your blood of your lives will I require . . . Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed."<sup>1</sup>

This fundamental law intended for all mankind reappears in a more developed form, as regards its ritual and dietary part, in Leviticus xvii. 10-14, where both the Israelites and "the strangers which sojourn among you" are solemnly reminded "not to eat any manner of blood". Since we are here on a purely ritual ground, no mention is made of shedding human blood. It seems that the Apostolic Decree, when it forbids, in addition to blood, things strangled and idol meat, that is to say two particular instances of flesh which is not bloodless, does nothing more than formulate again this minimum of ritual rules which is in theory intended for all mankind but which does in fact characterize those whom we usually label semi-proselytes or God-fearers,<sup>2</sup> and which reappears in a more developed form in the Talmudic writings, a point to which we shall come back later.

The basically ritual meaning of the Decree being thus established and, in fact, admitted by a large majority of scholars to-day, discussions have been raised concerning its precise wording. *Pnikton* may or may not belong to the original text of the Decree. The point is not of capital importance to us. What is more important is to decide about *porneia*. If we give this word its most usual meaning of sexual misbehaviour, fornication as the modern translations of the New Testament often put it, we turn back to an ethical or partly ethical interpretation. Some scholars have thus been led to assume that *porneia* does not belong to the authentic wording of the Decree. This opinion was put forward by T. W. Manson himself: "If the ethical interpretation breaks down, the only real alternative is that which

<sup>1</sup> On the Noachian commands, E. L. Dietrich, "Die Religion Noahs, ihre Herkunft und ihre Bedeutung", *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 1928, pp. 301 ff.

<sup>2</sup> On the God-fearers, Kirsopp Lake, "Proselytes and God fearers", *op. cit.* v. 74-95; G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, i (Cambridge, Mass., 1927), 323 ff.

understands the prohibition in connection with Jewish dietary practice. And in this case 'fornication' is quite out of place and should be removed from the text".<sup>1</sup>

The same assumption, namely that the Decree is exclusively concerned with food regulations, has led some other scholars to a slightly different conclusion. They think that the word *porneia* is not simply to be ruled out, but has been substituted by some copyist for another word. The text must be corrected in order to restore the authentic term, of which *porneia* is supposed to be a misreading. J. Halévy suggested *πορκεία*, as meaning pork.<sup>2</sup> But this is quite arbitrary, and even absurd, for the word *πορκεία* appears in no Greek text whatever, and represents an extraordinary barbarism built on the Latin. My Strasbourg colleague M. Philonenko, who thinks that *porneia* cannot be right but that *porkeia* is quite impossible too, revived a suggestion of the eighteenth-century scholar Richard Bentley and proposed the reading *χοιρεία*, which does indeed mean pork in classical Greek.<sup>3</sup> I feel unable, however, to follow him along this line. It is difficult to imagine how a copyist should have read and written *porneia* instead of *khoireia*, for which there is moreover not the slightest evidence in the textual tradition of Acts.

It is wrong, in my opinion, to assume that the prohibitions of the Decree cannot possibly be interpreted otherwise than in relation with Jewish dietary laws. Ritual prescriptions are one thing, dietary laws another. Though the first evidently include the second, and though three out of four prohibitions of the Apostolic Decree do indeed concern food, I see no reason why the fourth one should also, of necessity, be interpreted along this same line. All our manuscripts have *porneia*, which has been unanimously accepted by ancient ecclesiastical tradition.<sup>4</sup> It

<sup>1</sup> *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles* (Manchester, 1962), p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> "Notes Evangéliques, IV, Le concile de Jérusalem", *Revue Sémitique*, 1902, pp. 228 ff.

<sup>3</sup> "Le Décret Apostolique et les interdits alimentaires du Coran", *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses*, 1967, pp. 165-72.

<sup>4</sup> P. H. Menoud's conjecture, *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, Bulletin* ii (Oxford, 1951), 22 ff., that the original text included only two prohibitions, blood and idol meat, rests on little factual evidence; cf. the refutation by W. G. Kümmel, "Die älteste Form des Aposteldekrets", *Heilsgeschehen und Geschichte*

is particularly important, in this respect, to note that in two of the letters included in the first chapters of the Book of Revelation (ii. 14 and ii. 20), the two sins of *porneia* and of eating idol meat, *πορνεῦσαι καὶ φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα*, and these two only, are mentioned side by side. This association, as far as I know, appears in no other document of the ancient Church, with the only exception of the Apostolic Decree. It seems difficult to admit that so close a parallelism is merely fortuitous. Rather are we to see in the letters of Revelation a direct allusion to the Decree. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that the two documents, letters and Decree, are linked up with each other by one more analogy. We have decided, says the Decree, "to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things", *μηδὲν πλέον ἐπιτίθεσθαι ὑμῖν βάρος*; and in the letter to the Church in Thyatira we read the following sentence: "I will put upon you no other burden", *οὐ βάλλω ἐφ' ὑμᾶς ἄλλο βάρος* (ii. 24). Here again, it seems difficult to explain such a striking verbal analogy by mere coincidence.<sup>1</sup> We can therefore with every good reason safely assume and maintain that *porneia* does in fact belong to the primitive wording of the Decree. It is for us to see how we can best make sense of the word.

To the question why, if *porneia* has, in the Decree, its most usual meaning of fornication, this sin only should have been retained among a number of other ethical faults named and condemned in the Decalogue and the Old Testament, there is one possible answer. It takes into account the different mentalities of Jews and Christians on one side, of the heathen on the other. An explicit prohibition of theft, homicide or lies was (Marburg, 1965), pp. 278-88. In fact, *porneia* is omitted only in p. 45 and this might be inadvertence. The same omission appears in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 8, 29, but it is quite clear from the context that this can hardly be put forward against the traditional reading. The whole passage deals exclusively with dietary laws. Why should Origen therefore have included *porneia* in his quotation of the Decree? The way in which the quotation occurs excludes any mention of *porneia*: *μόνα . . . "ἐπάναγκες" ἀπαγορεύουσιν ἐσθίειν, ταῦτα δ' ἐστὶ τὰ ἥτοι εἰδωλόθυτα ἢ τὰ πικτὰ ἢ τὸ αἶμα*.

<sup>1</sup> Though this is admitted by A. Loisy, *L'Apocalypse de Jean* (Paris, 1923), p. 106; E. B. Allo, *L'Apocalypse* (Paris, 1921), p. 34; E. Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament, 16; Tübingen, 1926), p. 27.*

not absolutely necessary, because these were condemned by pagan ethics as well as by Jewish or Christian moral law. It might, on the contrary, have been thought appropriate and necessary explicitly to condemn sexual misbehaviour—indeed to be more precise than the Decalogue, which forbids only adultery—because common pagan mentality was not, in these matters, very touchy and exacting. The purpose of the Decree is certainly not to recall and underline commandments and prescriptions which, even to a Gentile eager to behave in accordance with natural law and with the voice of his conscience, are a matter of course, but rather to forbid certain things which are considered as natural or at least indifferent by both the conscience of a heathen and civil law, but which cannot possibly be admitted when judged by Jewish or Christian standards. The developments of 1 Corinthians on *porneia* and marriage reflect a conception of morality which is not, it seems, absolutely familiar to Paul's readers. It is to be remembered that Corinth in particular had the well deserved reputation of being a dissolute city.<sup>1</sup> It cannot therefore be excluded altogether that in the Decree *porneia* describes and condemns those same sins which Paul is dealing with in 1 Corinthians and which he mentions in a number of passages, the so-called *Lasterkataloge*, of his other Epistles. But it cannot be excluded either that Paul might have, consciously or not, restricted the meaning which the Decree had given to this word, and should have interpreted in an exclusively ethical sense a commandment which was at least partly, and perhaps even primarily, ritual. This second possibility is, in my opinion, the more likely, in the light of what has already been said of the general inspiration of the Decree.

To come one step further, we have to consider again the

<sup>1</sup> *κορινθιάζομαι* means to live a dissolute life, Aristophanes, *Fragm.* 133. The Jews were fully aware that in matters of regulations concerning sex life, they differed widely from the heathen. Sexual impurity and sexual deviations appear to them as inherent in paganism: W. Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter*, 3rd ed. (edited by H. Gressmann, Tübingen, 1926), p. 425; the Letter of Aristeas, 152, states that most peoples not only practise homosexuality, but also have sexual intercourse with their mothers and daughters; whole cities and countries even boast of it; the Jews completely abstain from these deviations.

so-called Noachian commands, but this time in their post-biblical, rabbinical codification.<sup>1</sup> From two only in Genesis they have become seven in the Talmud. Judged by our modern standards, two are of a specifically religious character : prohibition of idolatry and of blasphemy ; three are of an ethical nature : homicide, theft, and the positive command to have recourse to regular judgments, that is, before regularly established courts of justice ; one is of a ritual character : eating the flesh of living animals, which is tantamount to eating blood, since blood is the life and an animal whose blood is still in it is considered as still living ; and one can be labelled both ethical and ritual : incest in the widest acceptance of the word, that is marriage or sexual intercourse with relatives. This obviously refers to the list given in Leviticus xviii, the fundamental principle being that " none of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness " (xviii. 6).

It is certainly difficult, in these matters, to draw a sharp dividing line between what is ritual and what is ethical. While incest in the more precise meaning of the word, that is sexual intercourse with one's mother or sister for instance, is still to our modern eyes something morally abominable, and goes against a sort of unwritten law of nature, we would probably incline to be more lenient in some other cases, also considered as incest by Leviticus, when the family link is not so direct, when it is a matter of affinity and not of consanguinity. It seems evident that in the perspective of Leviticus, the cases which it enumerates represent infringements of a sexual taboo, based on ritual as much as, and perhaps even more than, on ethical considerations.

Since the regulations concerning food, and blood in particular, are codified in chapter xvii of Leviticus, it seems legitimate to consider that these two chapters, xvii and xviii, provide the basis of both the Apostolic Decree and the ritual or ethico-ritual parts of the Noachian commands in their rabbinical formulation. It is, of course, impossible to prove that this rabbinical formulation had already been shaped and was already observed by the God-fearers at the time when the Apostolic Decree was promulgated.

<sup>1</sup> *B. Sanhedrin*, 56b ; Kirsopp Lake, *op. cit.* p. 208.



I personally think it likely. It is therefore natural, or at least tempting, to consider that the Apostolic Decree represents, basically, an extract from this Noachian legislation. It leaves aside that part of it which is strictly religious or ethical and which the Gentile Christians were bound to observe, along with the Jewish moral law in general, as soon as they had joined the Church; and it formulates again, in a more precise form, those ritual or ethico-ritual commandments the observance of which was the very condition of full religious fellowship between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. If this is the case, and indeed even if the Decree is to be interpreted only against the background of Leviticus xvii-xviii and not of the rabbinical version of the Noachian commands, it seems pretty sure that this background provides at least a partial explanation of the word *porneia* in the Decree. In fact, a number of scholars consider that what is thus forbidden is just incest, marriage within certain degrees of consanguinity or affinity.<sup>1</sup>

To this restrictive interpretation there is however one strong objection. If it is really incest which is condemned, how is it that the apostles chose to describe it by a term so inappropriate and so open to misinterpretation as *porneia*? How could a Gentile possibly realize that *porneia*, which in its usual acceptance in the Greek speaking world meant prostitution or fornication, was in this precise case to be understood as meaning incest? One may think either that the apostles had no more satisfactory word at their disposal, or that they chose it deliberately, but then in order to describe not only one particular sin, incest, but a whole range of infringements of the commands and prohibitions regulating sexual life, or rather marriage, for the possibility of sexual intercourse outside marriage was probably not even envisaged.

It must not be forgotten, in this respect, that the Greek term is just the transcription of a Semitic word. For it is most likely that the discussions at the Jerusalem meeting did not take place

<sup>1</sup> Amongst others Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, ii (Munich, 1924), 729 ff. I have myself been of the same opinion (*Le Judaïsme et le Christianisme Antique*, Paris, 1968, p. 102), but I do not think now it can be held any longer.

in Greek, but either in the Aramaic vernacular, or in Hebrew, which was still largely used in schools. Even if it is indeed incest only which was to be condemned by the Decree, the catalogue in Leviticus xviii was of little help, for the prohibitions which it codifies are expressed in a verbal form: "Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness." The Talmud could transpose this way of expressing things into a nominal form, and speak of "the uncovering of nakedness". In Greek such a transposition would hardly be possible.<sup>1</sup> Since, on the other hand, in the Septuagint, *porneia* commonly translates the Hebrew word *zenuth*, we have some reason to assume that in the Decree too *zenuth*, with its various associations and implications, lies behind *porneia*. And then it is probably not incest only which is thus condemned.

*Porneia-zenuth* is often associated in the Old Testament and in the New, with idolatry. Sometimes it metaphorically describes idolatry, perhaps because of the ritual prostitution which was practised in some pagan, particularly Semitic, cults of the ancient Near East.<sup>2</sup> In some other cases the biblical text establishes between *porneia* and idolatry a sort of organic link and considers these two sins as conditioning or implying each other.<sup>3</sup> The beginning of the Epistle to the Romans, though the word *porneia* itself does not appear in this context, very clearly explains how idolatry is the source and root of all sexual perversions. Some scholars have thus come to consider that the various clauses of the Decree express nothing else than a condemnation of idolatry, described under different names.<sup>4</sup> Here again I feel it impossible to agree. For the Gentile Christians had, by the very fact of their conversion, renounced idolatry. There was therefore no further need to ask them to give it up. And even if the apostles had thought it necessary still to do it, why should they have

<sup>1</sup> The Septuagint has the verbal form: ἀσχημοσύνην οὐκ ἀποκαλύψεις. One wonders whether this really did make sense to a Greek speaking Gentile. Might not *porneia* have been first used in Hellenistic Judaism to explain—still inadequately—what was meant by this phrase?

<sup>2</sup> Num. xiv. 33; 1 Chron. v. 25; Jer. iii. 9; Ezek. xvi. 15; Hos. vi. 10; cf. Rev. 17, where Babylon, the great whore, is a personification of idolatry and of all vices it entails.

<sup>3</sup> Exod. xxxiv. 15-16; Wisd. xiv. 12; Gal. v. 19; 1 Thess. iv. 3, etc.

<sup>4</sup> This interpretation is analysed and refuted by Kirsopp Lake, *op. cit.* pp. 205 ff.

used such an inadequate way of speaking, instead of calling things by their own name? For eating *eidolothyta* is not synonymous with idolatry; and *porneia* describes idolatry by way of a metaphor the meaning of which is far from obvious.

The difficulty of attaining the right interpretation of *porneia* is no small one. And it is evident that the Decree considered in itself is of little help. It is necessary to replace this document in a wider context. Since its inspiration is fundamentally Jewish-Christian, it is likely that its meaning has been best understood in Jewish-Christian circles, and that even non-Christian Jewish texts may shed some light on the problems it raises.

Recourse has been sometimes taken, in my opinion quite rightly, to the Pseudo-Clementine writings, which in several passages display very clearly an influence of the Decree.<sup>1</sup> This point has been emphasized in particular by Einar Molland.<sup>2</sup> The most significant passage in this respect is in *Homilies* vii. 8. It formulates specifically religious and ethical commandments along with ritual prohibitions which are alone of interest to us for our present purpose, and which can be subdivided into regulations concerning food and regulations concerning sexual life. The first reproduce, under the general heading not to partake of the table of the devils,<sup>3</sup> and in a more precise form, the precepts of the Apostolic Decree: "To abstain from idol meat, from what has died of itself, from things strangled, from what has been killed by wild beasts, and from blood." The precepts concerning sexual life are, from our present point of view, even more interesting. They enjoin "not to live in uncleanness (*μὴ ἀκαθάρτως βιοῦν*), to wash oneself after leaving the bed of a woman; and women for their part must obey the rules concerning menstruation". This is a very clear reference to Leviticus xv. 18 and xviii. 19. The word *porneia* itself does

<sup>1</sup> This view has been recently challenged by A. F. J. Klijn, "The Pseudo-Clementines and the Apostolic Decree", *Novum Testamentum*, x (1968), 305-12, whose arguments I find unconvincing.

<sup>2</sup> "La circoncision, le baptême et l'autorité du décret apostolique dans le milieu judéo-chrétien des Pseudo-Clementines", *Studia Theologica*, 1955, pp. 1-39.

<sup>3</sup> The same expression appears in 1 Cor. x. 21.

not appear in this passage of the Pseudo-Clementines. But there can be little doubt, in my opinion, that the phrase "not to live in uncleanness" represents an equivalent of, or a sort of a commentary on, *porneia*. It is even possible that it has been deliberately substituted for this word, which was apt to be misunderstood. To the writer of this passage *porneia* is tantamount to unclean living, and this uncleanness, as illustrated by the context, is of a specifically ritual nature. It is doubtful, however, that, even to him, it is restricted to the two infringements he mentions: these are probably just two examples, chosen among a number of other possible violations of levitical purity. In order to elucidate the full meaning of *porneia*, other sources still must be taken into account. Two texts seem to me particularly interesting in this respect.

The first one appears in the so-called Zadokite Documents, copies of which have been found at Qumran. The passage deals with "the three nets of Belial. . . . The first is whoredom (*zenuth*), the second is wealth, the third is conveying uncleanness to the Sanctuary. . . . They have been caught in whoredom by marrying two women in their lifetime. . . . They convey uncleanness to the Sanctuary inasmuch as they do not keep separate according to the Law, but lie with her that sees the blood of her flux, and they marry each man the daughter of his brother and the daughter of his sister".<sup>1</sup> Polygamy, infringement of the prohibitions of Leviticus concerning the menstrual period, and marriages within certain degrees of consanguinity: this is what our document means by *zenuth-porneia*.

The second text is in the Book of Tobit iv. 12. It formulates on the question of *porneia* the following precepts: "Beware, my child, of all whoredom (*ἀπὸ πάσης πορνείας*) and take a wife from the race of thy fathers; do not marry an alien wife."

<sup>1</sup> 4, 15-5, 11, Chaim Rabin, *The Zadokite Documents* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 16 ff. The Hebrew text has the masculine for "in their lifetime", but it should probably be amended: the feminine makes much better sense, in accordance with Lev. xviii 18; it is bigamy, rather than divorce, which is thus condemned, but perhaps also remarriage after divorce, when the first wife is still living: A. Dupont-Sommer, *Les écrits esséniens découverts près de la Mer Morte* (Paris, 1959), p. 144, n. 1. There is some overlapping between "the first net of Belial" and the third.

By *porneia* is meant here mixed marriages, marriages between a Jew and a pagan woman. Or at least these marriages represent one case of *porneia*.

One understands better, in the light of these examples, the extreme complexity of the term and notion of *porneia-zenuth*. It seems sure that the interpretation given by each of our texts is but a partial one. None of them is exhaustive. We must not, therefore, in order to elucidate the term in a satisfactory way, as regards in particular the Apostolic Decree, proceed by way of a dilemma—*porneia* means either this or that—but rather put together the whole range of different meanings proposed by our texts, each of which stresses one aspect of, and provides a sort of halachic gloss on, the term. *Porneia* is then to be understood as the sum of these various partial meanings.

In the previously mentioned article, Einar Molland notes that the modern commentaries on Acts give five different interpretations of *porneia* in the Decree: (1) fornication in the usual meaning of the word, extra conjugal sexual intercourse; (2) idolatry; (3) participation in ritual prostitution in pagan temples; (4) concubinage, or polygamy, or marriage with a heathen, or second marriage; (5) consanguineous marriages. He himself proposes a sixth one, that of the Pseudo-Clementines, namely infringements of the levitical regulations concerning sexual purity, which, he thinks, is the true one. I think, as he does, that No. 1 is not very likely, or at least that it is not with this form of *porneia* that the Decree is most directly concerned. He is certainly right in excluding No. 2 and No. 3. But I think we must exclude neither No. 4 nor No. 5, nor Molland's own interpretation, for each of them is supported by one of the texts I have quoted.<sup>1</sup> We may probably even add to the list homosexuality and copulation with animals which are explicitly condemned in Leviticus xviii. 22-23.

We are thus led to the conclusion that the Decree represents,

<sup>1</sup> A. F. J. Klijn, op. cit. p. 311, states somewhat rashly that the meaning of *porneia* in the sense of sexual impurity has no parallel, and that, consequently, "the identification of *porneia* and sexual impurity is a fallacy". This is contradicted by the Zadokite Document, which, in its turn, supports the interpretation of ἀκαθάρτως βιοῦν in the Pseudo-Clementines as being another way of expressing *porneia*.

in all likelihood, a condensed code of levitical purity, based mainly on chapters xvi, xvii and xviii of Leviticus, but also, as regards mixed marriages, on Exodus xxxiv. 15-16.<sup>1</sup> In order to be accepted into the ecclesiastical fellowship, whose spirit is still closely akin to that of the Synagogue, the Gentile Christians must be free from any form of physical defilement, and this springs from two main sources: unclean food and sexual uncleanness. This notion of levitical or ritual purity gives the Decree, considered in its dietary commandments on the one hand, its prohibition of *porneia* on the other, its fundamental unity. And the clue to the right understanding of the document is perhaps provided by the word *aligēma* used by James (τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων), which means precisely ritual pollution.<sup>2</sup> It is applied by James to defilement by food, but could probably just as well describe sexual uncleanness which, like unclean food, pollutes not only the sinner himself, but also those with whom he has social intercourse. Theft or lies do not, it seems, because the body is not directly concerned, entail ritual uncleanness; violations of dietary laws, or of laws regulating sex life, do. It is permissible for a Jew or a Jewish Christian to sit at the table of one he knows to be a liar or a thief; but he must have no contact with one who breaks the commandments about food or sex life. For the ritual uncleanness of such a man is, so to speak, contagious, which theft and lies are not.

We must now try and elucidate briefly two points: what is the precise relation between the Apostolic Decree and the already mentioned letters in the Book of Revelation? And how are the Decree and these letters related to Paul's Epistles, especially to 1 Corinthians?

There can be little doubt, as already noted, that the letters to the Churches of Pergamos and Thyatira directly refer to the Decree when they denounce those heretics who indulge in *porneia* and the eating of idol meat. These two prohibitions of the Decree had apparently been isolated from their context

<sup>1</sup> Cf. also Ezra ix-x; Neh. xiii. 23-30.

<sup>2</sup> "ἀλίγημα is a hapax legomenon, derived from a verb ἀλισγέω, which occurs six times in LXX (Dan. i. 8; Mal. i. 7 *ter*, 12; Sir, xl. 29) each time in connection with food" (F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 300).

and become a sort of an anti-pagan slogan : to commit *porneia* and to eat things sacrificed to idols meant to live a life unworthy of a Christian, to follow pagan ways of life. But while the accusation of eating idol meat is perfectly clear and calls for no explanation, it is difficult to assess what the letters exactly mean by *porneia*. I incline to think that to eat idol meat is, at any rate, the effective and basic accusation, and that the charge of *porneusai* represents a sort of commentary on it. It proceeds from this idea that people who violate, on a point deemed of capital importance, the ecclesiastical regulations, can with good reason be accused, or at least suspected, of every possible sin, *porneia* being in this case an inclusive description, so to speak, of their behaviour. The term can, in this context, be understood in a metaphorical sense as emphasizing a lax position in matters of doctrine and ritual practice. It can also, of course, describe some precise tendency toward sexual libertinage.<sup>1</sup> We cannot, here, go beyond hypotheses, for we know too little of that mysterious sect of the Nicolaitans which is made responsible for the sins denounced by our letters. But since in both letters the accusation of *φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα καὶ πορνεῦσαι* is formulated with reference to an Old Testament episode where the eating of sacrificial meat and sexual intercourse or marriage with pagan women are linked with each other,<sup>2</sup> it is at least plausible that mixed marriages were considered, in the Churches of Asia Minor, as exposing the Christian husband to the risk of eating idol meat, and were consequently denounced as *porneia*.<sup>3</sup>

On reading the letters of Revelation, one gets the impression that they fight, as it were, on two different front lines. They are facing, on the one hand, the extreme Judaizers and the Jews, on the other a particular brand of Christianity, more fully detached from Jewish norms and observance than the author of the letters, which is represented by the Nicolaitans, but also smacks of Paulinism. They defend against these two extremes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the comments of Allo, op. cit. pp. 33 ff., and Loisy, op. cit. pp. 101 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Num. xxv. 1 ff. and 1 Kings xvi. 31 ; xviii. 19 ; 2 Kings ix. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Since at least part of the meat sold in a butcher's shop had been sacrificed in a temple, and none had been slaughtered in accordance with *kashruth* regulations, a Jewish or a Christian housewife would avoid buying there while a pagan wife, even married to a Christian, would probably be less careful.

the *via media* position of a mitigated Jewish Christianity. When the letter to the Church in Thyatira solemnly proclaims "I shall lay upon you no other burden", this is obviously intended for those who attempt to impose upon the Gentile Christians the whole ritual Law. When, on the other hand, the letter to the Church of Ephesus denounces "them which say they are apostles, and are not" (ii. 2), this seems to echo the controversies arisen in the first Christian generation about Paul's apostleship.<sup>1</sup> The strong emphasis put on the concept of "works" (ii. 2; ii. 19) leaves the same impression. The "depths of Satan" mentioned in ii. 24 might be a sort of allusion to the "depths of God" mentioned in 1 Corinthians ii. 10. Reminiscences of, or direct allusions to, Paul's teaching and even to the letter of his writings appear very likely. Asia Minor had been one of Paul's most important missionary fields. It is to be assumed that his Epistles were known and read in that part of Christendom, and that some sections at least of the local Churches attempted to maintain the fundamental principles of his gospel. But at the same time Asia Minor was a country where Jewish and Jewish Christian influences were very active. In front of these two conflicting tendencies the letters in Revelation cling to what they consider the authentic form of apostolic Christianity as expressed and summarized in the Apostolic Decree.

It is important therefore to try to elucidate Paul's own position *vis-à-vis* the Decree. The problem is not an easy one, and a number of solutions have been proposed.<sup>2</sup> One fact at least is perfectly clear: nowhere does Paul quote or explicitly mention the Decree. But it seems difficult to admit that he ignored its existence, even if, as I personally think, he was not present when it was promulgated and took no part in its elaboration. It seems certain, on the contrary, that the developments which he devotes, in chapters v to x of 1 Corinthians, to the problems of sexual life and marriage on one hand, to the dietary laws and in particular to idol meat on the other, represent a sort of commentary on the Decree and, more precisely, on the two clauses considered apparently by Paul—as by the author of the letters in

<sup>1</sup> Rom. xi. 13; 1 Cor. ix. 1-2; xv. 9; Gal. i. 1; i. 16-19; ii. 6-9, etc.

<sup>2</sup> A good survey is given by Hurd, *op. cit.* pp. 254-63.



Revelation—as fundamental: *porneia* and *eidolothyta*.<sup>1</sup> It is also very striking that the structure of the Pauline developments on these questions corresponds to that of Leviticus xvii-xviii, with the only difference that the order is reversed, the problems of marriage being discussed by Paul before the problems of food, while in Leviticus it is the contrary. It is certainly no mere coincidence if these two series of problems are considered by Paul, as in Leviticus and in the Apostolic Decree, in direct connection with each other.

Paul would certainly be prepared to conform to the Decree for reasons of mere expediency, in order not to give offence to the weak brethren. But he could not, in conscience, accept it on principle. His conception of *porneia* is apparently purely ethical. Marriage, far from constituting in some cases one particular instance of *porneia*, is presented as the best remedy against it.<sup>2</sup> The term is given exactly the same meaning in 1 Corinthians as in those catalogues of vices already mentioned. It is possible, however, to discover behind those developments, where it is taken in its common acceptance, some clear allusions to the meaning which it has in the Decree: thus at the beginning of chapter v, when Paul denounces “such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife”. This represents an infringement of one of the commandments of Leviticus xviii, an incest as understood by the Law of Moses, the Noachian commands and the Apostolic Decree: “thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy father’s wife”, thy stepmother (Lev. xviii. 8). On this precise point the Decree is, even in Paul’s eyes, absolutely binding.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary it can be assumed that his instructions concerning mixed marriages, while they presuppose the Decree, do in fact mitigate its prescriptions: there seems to be at least an allusion

<sup>1</sup> It is significant of Paul’s position that he does not mention blood. To him the problem of Jewish ritual observance is unimportant. The real question is whether or not a Christian who eats idol meat becomes subdued by the devils to which it has been sacrificed; and the answer is negative, for the devils have no real power. It is therefore permissible to buy “whatsoever is sold in the shambles”, 1 Cor. x. 25.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. vii. 1 ff.

<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (London, 1969), pp. 272-3.

to *porneia* as describing mixed marriages when Paul says that a man—or a woman—married to one “that believeth not” is under no obligation to leave her or him (vii. 12-13): this amounts to saying that such a marriage cannot be considered as *porneia*. But it is to be noted that Paul envisages only marriages concluded prior to the conversion of one of the partners. He does not say even one word about the possibility for one already belonging to the Church subsequently to marry a heathen. This silence can perhaps be interpreted as a tacit admission that such a marriage would indeed be *porneia*. Likewise, Paul admits the possibility for a widow to remarry, but then only “in the Lord” (vii. 39), which apparently means to a Christian: Paul would therefore tacitly admit that a second marriage with a non-Christian partner would constitute a case of *porneia*.

One would incline to think that Paul also has the Apostolic Decree in view when he reaffirms his apostolic authority *vis-à-vis* the Corinthian Christians: “If I be not an apostle unto others, yet doubtless I am to you” (ix. 2). This sentence is best understood if one has in mind the subscription of the Decree, promulgated in Paul’s absence: “The apostles and the elders”, which seems to restrict the quality of an apostle to the Twelve only. It is moreover to be noted that Paul makes a careful distinction between what he commands in the name of God (vii. 10) and what he only recommends as his own personal opinion (vii. 12; vii. 25). This might be a discreet criticism of the authoritative way in which the Jerusalem disciples presented the Decree as divinely inspired, whereas to Paul their decision was a merely human one, a matter of opinion and not of divine commandment. This hypothesis is, I think, strengthened by the fact that, at the end of his instructions concerning sexual life and marriage, Paul states, by way of conclusion: “And I think also that I have the Spirit of God” (vii. 40): this may well appear as a direct reply to the Decree which is placed by the Twelve under the authority of the Holy Spirit: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.”

It may be interesting briefly to examine what became of the Decree in the ancient Church after the Apostolic Age. There

can be no doubt that for generations it was considered as absolutely binding. Justin Martyr makes abstention from *eidolothyta* the very touchstone of orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> The letter written by the Church in Lyons to the Churches in Asia after the local persecution of 177 shows that the commandment concerning blood was still strictly observed,<sup>2</sup> and so does Tertullian, who also states that mixed marriages represent a *stuprum*, evidently the Latin equivalent of *porneia*.<sup>3</sup> It would be easy to collect a whole series of evidences.<sup>4</sup> At the very end of the fourth century St. Augustine ridicules those Christians who still feel bound to abstain from the flesh of an animal strangled or from flesh not completely bloodless.<sup>5</sup> These are, by that time, a minority, at least in the Western Church, for in the East the dietary prescriptions of the Decree were still observed at a much later date.<sup>6</sup> Very soon however, a tendency appeared towards a completely different interpretation of the Decree and in particular of its dietary prescriptions. I am not speaking here of that purely ethical interpretation to which the so-called Western text of Acts bears witness. The interpretation to which I am referring takes the regulations about food as they stand, but gives them a completely new significance. From ritual commandments, which they were initially, they become precepts of ascetic discipline.

This tendency is already noticeable in the Apostolic Age, and in the Pauline Epistles. Although his fundamental principle, as regards dietary laws, is "do not offend the weak", Paul none the less affirms that "it is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth" (Rom.

<sup>1</sup> *Dialogue*, 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, 5, 1, 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Apol.* 9; *ad uxorem*, 2, 3; cf. *de poenitentia*, 8; also Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 30.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. C. K. Barrett, "Things Sacrificed to Idols", *New Testament Studies* (January 1965), pp. 138 ff.; E. Molland, *op. cit.* pp. 35-36. It is evident that what is condemned is not participation in sacrificial meals, which would amount to idolatry and is excluded *a priori*, but just domestic use of idol meat.

<sup>5</sup> *Contra Faustum*, 32, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. K. Böckenhoff, *Das apostolische Speisegesetz in den ersten fünf Jahrhunderten* (Paderborn, 1903). Even in the West the prescription of the Decree remained sometimes in vigour at a very late date: "Towards the end of the ninth century they were included by King Alfred of England in the preamble to his law-code" (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, p. 316).

xiv. 21). This is not a rigorous command, but just a suggestion and advice, and the criterion still is "not to offend the weak". But it is evident that the weak are not only those Christians who observe the regulations of the Decree, or other Jewish ritual precepts, but also those who follow an ascetic line and abstain completely from any sort of meat and of alcoholic drink, who are both vegetarians and teetotalers. This ascetic movement seems to have been present in the early Church from the very beginning. There is more than one allusion to it in Paul's Epistles as well as in the Pastoral Epistles, in particular 1 Timothy.<sup>1</sup> And, what is of special interest to us, it is quite evidently linked up with the Apostolic Decree, considered as representing a minimum, not indeed in matters of ritual law, but along the line of Christian asceticism.

It is sometimes difficult to discern very clearly what is Jewish Christian observance, and what is ascetic discipline, where the one ends and where the other begins: thus in the *Didache*, vi. 2: "in matters of food, do what you can; but abstain at any cost from idol meat, which is worship of dead gods". Abstention from *eidolothyta* is thus presented as a minimum, and the Christians are invited to go one step further. But it is not easy to say whether the suggestion is that they should conform to all the dietary prescriptions of the Jewish Law, or that they should abstain altogether from meat. Anyhow, the link with the Decree is made evident by the mention of *eidolothyta*. It is to be remembered, moreover, that, as is commonly recognized to-day, one of the main roots of those ascetic tendencies existing in the ancient Church and of the Encratite movement is to be found in Jewish-Christian quarters.<sup>2</sup> The Pseudo-Clementines explain at great length that, in the original divine plan, mankind was to abstain completely from meat. Consumption of meat is one of the consequences of the intercourse between fallen angels and women, and a definite manifestation of evil. Consequently, vegetarianism is strongly recommended by the

<sup>1</sup> Rom. xiv. 2; Col. ii. 23; 1 Tim. iv. 3-4; v. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H. J. Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums* (Tübingen, 1949), pp. 188 ff.; J. Daniélou, *Théologie du Judéo-Christianisme* (Tournai, 1958), pp. 426 ff.

Ebionite community and regularly practised by its leaders.<sup>1</sup> Among the Gentile Christians the same tendency exists. When Origen vindicates, against Celsus' criticism, the prohibition of *eidolothyta*, although he declares that there is no rigorous prescription concerning food beyond this one commandment, he none the less summarizes the Christian position in a quotation from the *Sentences of Sextus*: "It is a matter of moral indifference to eat animal flesh, but abstinence is more rational."<sup>2</sup> Likewise, in the Sibylline Oracles, the reader is reminded "not to damage his brains with wine, not to drink beyond measure, not to eat blood, to abstain from idol meat" (ii. 93). Here again the Decree provides the basis of the instruction, but its clauses are interpreted and widened along an ascetic line.

One of the most interesting witnesses of this process is to be found in the so-called Canons of the Apostles, a fourth-century, probably Syrian, document.<sup>3</sup> They carefully distinguish between ascetic discipline which is, within certain limits, quite legitimate, and a concern for ritual observance which is to be condemned altogether: "Every cleric, bishop, priest or deacon, who abstains from marrying, eating meat and drinking wine, not for the sake of asceticism, but because he considers these things as defilements, though Holy Scripture states that they are good and that God created man male and female, shall either change his mind, or be cast out of the Church, and laymen likewise. But if this abstinence is inspired by a spirit of penitence and piety, it is permissible."<sup>4</sup> But while they definitely condemn vegetarianism and teetotalism when inspired by ritual considerations, the Canons

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the portrait of James, the Lord's brother, given by Hegesippus, Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, 2, 23, 4; *Pseudo-Clem. Homilies*, 8, 15; 12, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Contra Cels.*, 8, 29-30; H. Chadwick, *The Sentences of Sextus* (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 107 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Published at the end of the Apostolic Constitutions in F. X. Funk, *Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum*, i (Paderborn, 1905), 565-95. Cf. also *Patrologia Orientalis*, vol. viii (Paris, 1912), which gives an Arabic version, with French translation, of *Les 127 Canons des Apôtres*, pp. 553-710. The second part of these 127 Canons reproduces, with some slight alterations, the 85 Greek Canons appended to the Apostolic Constitutions; cf. article "Canons des Apôtres" (F. Nau), *Dictionnaire de Théol. Catholique*, II (Paris, 1905), col. 1605 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Canon 51, Funk, p. 581; Canon 35, PO, p. 680. The last sentence appears in the Arabic text, but not in the Greek.

none the less unreservedly maintain the dietary prescriptions of the Decree: "If a bishop, a priest, a deacon or any other cleric eat meat with its own blood, the flesh of an animal torn by a wild beast, or an animal which died of itself, they shall be dismissed; if it is a layman, he shall be excommunicated."<sup>1</sup> If no mention is made of *eidolothyta*, it is probably because, by the middle of the fourth century, paganism was rapidly dwindling away in this part of the ancient world, and there were few opportunities for the Christians to eat idol meat.

We may, I think, assume that those clerics and laymen who abstained from marriage because it was a defilement, saw in it one particular aspect of *porneia*. What the Canons themselves mean by *porneia* is made clear by the following passage, which debars from Holy Orders "those who married a second time after being baptized, or lived with a concubine, or married a widow, a woman suspected or dishonourable, a prostitute, a slave, or a woman who attends places of amusement . . . those who cohabited with two sisters, or with their own niece or who, having married two wives, lived with both together".<sup>2</sup> This last clause, prohibiting sexual intercourse with one's niece and bigamy, coincides with the previously quoted Zadokite Document. It is on a line with the Jewish and Jewish Christian regulations, and helps to a right interpretation of the Apostolic Decree, on which the Canons, quite evidently, take their stand. The passage as a whole, however, gives the word *porneia* a more extensive meaning than it has in the Decree. It includes prohibitions which cannot possibly be considered as ritual. It combines, in a curious way, a number of different criteria. While marrying a prostitute can be considered immoral, but could also have been condemned as entailing permanent physical defilement, this can hardly be the case with a slave, and the

<sup>1</sup> Canon 63, Funk, p. 583; Canon 44, PO, p. 683.

<sup>2</sup> Canons 17-19, Funk, p. 569; Canon 13, PO, p. 669. The clause concerning bigamy is not in the Greek text, but only in the Arabic: the translator, it seems, felt the Greek ambiguous (*ὁ δυοὶ γάμοις συμπλακεῖς*) and therefore made the distinction between two successive marriages—the second taking place probably after the first wife's death—and the fact of living with two wives at the same time. "A woman who attends places of amusement" is a somewhat awkward rendering in the Arabic, of the Greek *τῶν ἐπὶ σκηνῆς*, an actress.

prohibition here just seems to reflect the social conventions and prejudices of the ancient world ; and the interdiction of marrying a widow, or of remarrying, expresses that ascetic tendency which characterizes the Canons of the Apostles.

How then are we to estimate, in the light of these remarks, the purport of the Apostolic Decree in the ancient Church? I have underlined the relation which, I think, exists between the Noachian commands and the Decree. Though the second seems to presuppose the first, these two documents none the less breathe quite a different spirit. The Noachian legislation, which is intended for the semi-proselytes or God-fearers, does not, it seems, make them part and parcel of the Jewish community. In particular, Jews are not allowed to sit at a semi-proselyte's table : according to Acts xi. 2-3, Peter is blamed by the Jerusalem disciples for having taken a meal with Cornelius, who is explicitly called a God-fearer. On the contrary, the purpose of the Decree is precisely to establish between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians an effective community, in particular as regards meals, and thus to make possible a common celebration of the Lord's Supper. While the Noachian commands constitute a rule of life, including both moral and ritual precepts, the Decree is just a code of levitical purity, added to the ethical commandments of the Decalogue, whose observance is the very basis of ecclesiastical fellowship.

One might incline, at first sight, to think that the result of the Decree was to establish within the early Church a hierarchic distinction between two different categories of Christians, the one still bound by the whole Law of Moses, the other having to accept and obey just that minimum of ritual observance codified by the Decree. In fact, however, the Gentile Christians considered themselves as full-fledged members of the Church and as enjoying equal rights with their Jewish-Christian brethren, even if these may sometimes have been somewhat reluctant to recognize this equality. While the Decree goes against the tendency represented by Paul and illustrates the triumph of what can be described as moderate or mitigated Jewish Christianity, it also amounts to a defeat of extreme, uncompromising

Jewish Christianity. Paul would certainly have objected to such a document. The Decree none the less favours, up to a point, his idea of the newness of the Christian message. In obeying the Noachian commands the god-fearers did not become Jews ; but the Gentiles who obeyed the Decree became Christians, without further qualification ; actually, they soon became the very backbone of the Church. Measured by Pauline standards, the Decree, which reflects Jewish ways of thinking and adopts some measure of Jewish legal prescriptions, might well represent a step backward. Seen in a wider setting, and if we remember that uncompromising Jewish Christianity still was active and aggressive, it proclaims the autonomy of the Christian Church over against the Synagogue. It is in fact on this basis, different from that which Paul had considered, that the autonomy was achieved. Here lies the significance and historical importance of the Apostolic Decree.