

Das Aposteldekret (Acts 15:28, 29). Seine Entstehung und Geltung in den ersten vier
Jahrhunderten (Preisschrift)

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The treatise bearing the above title forms the fifth installment of the “Veröffentlichungen des biblisch-patristischen Seminars zu Innsbruck”. It confines itself to the discussion of the Apostolic decree strictly so-called, and does not profess to deal with the larger subject of the Apostolic council, or even with the Apostolic letter addressed by that meeting to the churches. Nor does the author examine in detail the relations between Acts 15 and Gal. 2, except in so far as this proves unavoidable in dealing with the decree. The treatise is divided into two parts, an exegetical and an historical one, the former relating to the origin of the decree, the latter to its enforcement in the first four centuries of the history of the church. Under the head of the origin the author deals first of all with the textual problem. He rejects the interpretation of the decree as an exclusively moral prescript on the basis of the form in which it appears in the Western text, which omits the words *καὶ πνικτων* and adds the golden rule, *καὶ οσα μη θελετε εαυτοις γινεσθαι ετερω μη ποιειν*, and is therefore understood by most of the advocates of its priority to take *αιμα* not in the sense of “eating of blood” but of “murder”; and *ειδωλοθυτα* in the looser sense of “idolatry” rather than in the strict sense of “meat of animals sacrificed to idols”. This peculiar interpretation goes as far back as Tertullian. In modern times it has been advocated by Hilgenfeld, A. Resch, G. Resch, Lake, and especially of late by Harnack, who had at one time rejected both it and the Western text on which it is based, but now is of the opposite opinion and thinks that the moral interpretation of the decree renders support to the credibility of Acts and removes the main obstacle to the reconciliation of Acts with Galatians. It seems to us that Six very properly maintains the separability of the two questions, the textual one and the exegetical one (moral or ceremonial interpretation of the prescripts). Of course, if the *πνικτων* is original, the decree cannot be of exclusively moral import. But it does not follow that, if the *πνικτων* is secondary, the moral interpretation is thereby made necessary. The author is even willing to concede on purely textual grounds that *πνικτων* may be an interpolation dating from the very early part of the second century, and yet maintains with much force, that, after its elimination, what remains must be understood as referring to eating and not to idolatry as such or murder. The omission of *πνικτων* and the occurrence of the golden rule should not be allowed cumulative force in favor of the moral exegesis, because on the one hand these two features do not occur uniformly together in the variant texts, and on the other hand it cannot be proven that the addition of the golden rule necessarily imparts to the preceding clauses a moral import, the golden rule being quite in place immediately after the prescript to abstain from certain externals for the sake of not giving offense to Jewish fellow-Christians. For such as may have been captivated by Harnack’s skillful presentation of his view we can recommend the reading of these pages. It will probably convince them that the more common view is by no means discredited and can well maintain itself, even if the Western text should come to be accepted.

In the further exegetical examination of the decree Six takes pains to differentiate its contents sharply from the dietary ritual observances prescribed in the Old Testament law for the Jews as such. It rests on a broader basis, which the Old Testament law itself makes obligatory not merely upon the Israelites but upon the sojourners with Israel as well. Its basis is found mainly in Lev. 3:17, 7:26 ff., 17:10-14, 19:26, passages which emphasize the obligation of the things spoken of for the advenae. On

the other hand the prescripts are not to be identified with the so-called “Noachian Commandments”, for these were supposed to apply to the Gentiles at large, as well as to people associating themselves with Israel. The rules must be understood on the basis of a regulation of the life of proselytes. As to the question, whether the Apostles for the first time formulated them with this basis in mind, or already found them in existence as proselyte-rules and merely applied them to Gentile-Christians, the author is non-committal. It should be noticed, however, that he rejects A. Seeberg’s hypothesis, according to whom the Apostles in the original form of the decree had only forbidden the eating of meat sacrificed to idols and fornication, whilst the other two items, abstention from blood and things strangled, entered subsequently into the decree, being taken over from the “Wege”, a much read Jewish catechism used in connection with the proselyte-baptism. Seeberg thinks that perhaps at the council James may have already proposed to incorporate these items, but that they were not at that time inserted. But at the time of the writing of Acts they had already become a recognized part of the decree.

The purpose of the decree was to facilitate the association of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Only this must not be understood as an attempt to render possible a living together of these two elements without restrictions. Particularly community of eating was not contemplated; for that far more thoroughgoing abstinence would have been required of the Gentiles than these simple, fundamental rules prescribed. What Peter did at Antioch was something lying altogether beyond the scope of the decree. The much-disputed sentence of Acts 15:21 is interpreted in this sense that the reading of Moses in the synagogues constantly brings to the attention of those who hear it, Jews and proselytes both, that such fundamental requirements are made of all who desire to associate with Israel, and that the Gentile Christians therefore must not give offense to the Jews or Jewish Christians in a matter of which the latter are kept in constant remembrance and in regard to which they are particularly sensitive. But with the enforcement of the Levitical law in the sense in which strict Jews imposed it on themselves this had nothing to do. Hence the author is able to argue that Paul could pass by the decree in silence, when the controversy was about the imposition of the law as such, and even the *οὐδεν προσανεθευτο* of Gal. 2:6 retains its full force, if it should be understood, as usually it is, of legal impositions, although it might in the author’s opinion, very well be interpreted of doctrinal additions to the Gospel, as suggested by the Latin version *nihil contulerunt*. At any rate the Apostolic decree is not the *rocher de bronze* on which it can be claimed that the historicity of Acts must suffer shipwreck.

In the second part of the treatise it is shown how subsequently, when, with the disappearance of the Jewish element in the Church, the primary purpose of the decree became obsolete, a new meaning came to be attached to it and it gradually changed into a dietary rule. In the tracing of this process during the first four centuries the author largely depends on the material collected by Böckenhoff in his work *Das Apostolische Speisegesetz in den ersten fünf Jahrhunderten*, 1903. The main element deserving attention in this part of the work is the correction of the presently prevailing views concerning the attitude of the occidental fathers towards the decree. After a period of relative legalism the West returned in a practical and exegetical aspect to the original understanding of the Apostolic rule.