

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## The Decree of the First Church Council.<sup>1</sup>

(ACTS XV.)

Acts xv. 20, "That we write unto them that they abstain from the pollution of idols and from fornication [and from what is strangled<sup>2</sup>] and from blood" (Ib. ver. 29) The decree, "These necessary things—that ye abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood [and from things strangled<sup>2</sup>] and from fornication, from which if ye keep yourselves it shall be well with you."

THE above enumeration of the "things necessary" for a Gentile convert probably perplexes many readers of the Acts. My footnote testifies to the antiquity of this impression. Even before the third century Christians were puzzled about the import of the decree issued *cir.* A.D. 50 by the Council at Jerusalem. In Alexandria and the East it was thenceforth usually interpreted as mainly a dietetic law. In Europe and Africa, on the other hand, it was regarded as a caution against certain deadly sins. Connected with this varying exegesis is a corresponding textual variation. The MSS.  $\aleph$  A B C P, etc., supported by the Alexandrian Fathers Clement and Origen, have the familiar decree of four clauses. Codex Bezae and several Western Fathers, along with some less weighty authorities, have a three-clause decree and supplement it with the Golden Rule.

My aim in this paper is to suggest a third alternative. Insuperable difficulties appear to obsess both (a) the theory of a food-law and (b) the theory of a decree levelled against three sins. By their exposure and by some constructive argument I hope to commend theory (c), viz. that the decree (which was probably one of three clauses) simply cautioned the new converts against "syncretism" or disloyal association with the cults of heathenism.

I. Theory (a) presenting the text as in our English versions, makes three-fourths of a four-clause decree deal with food, the Apostles' aim being to retain for the new converts certain of the "kosher"

<sup>1</sup> The subject of a paper recently read at the Seminar now working on the Acts at Jesus College, Cambridge.

<sup>2</sup> This clause is omitted in both verses in Codex Bezae, several cursive MSS. and the Latin Version, as also by Irenæus, Tertullian, Cyprian and other Latin writers. Jerome says it was to be found in some MSS. Codex Bezae and most of these authorities insert in both verses an additional stipulation, viz., "And do not to others what you would not that they should do to you," and in verse 29 have before the "Fare ye well" the words "being carried along by the Holy Spirit."

regulations of the Jews. Against this view I tabulate the following grave objections :—

(1) The ranking a deadly sin along with such practices as eating a shot bird or a coursed hare would have rather increased than diminished the new converts' difficulties of conscience, and tended to continued "subversion of their souls" (ver. 24).

(2) An Apostolic Council issues these supposedly dietetic mandates in professed plenitude of inspiration, and no subsequent Council suspends or qualifies them. Yet certainly they have been but little honoured by the Church. The early Christians often retained from the Old Testament or from Oriental custom a scruple against food not thoroughly bled.<sup>1</sup> But there is no evidence of their regulating their diet in deference to the Apostolic decree. Contrariwise the "Didaché," written only some fifty years later, makes all food except things "offered in sacrifice to idols" matter of private conscience ("Didaché," ch. vi.). Is it conceivable that its writer had ever heard that the Apostles absolutely prohibited "things strangled, and blood" ?

(3) The same remark applies to St. Paul himself, and further, theory (a) sets in startling contrast this Apostle's teachings and Luke's account of his actions. In Acts xvi. 4 Paul is represented as dutifully circulating this conciliar decree among his own converts. Yet only about eight years afterwards he asserts in Romans xiv. the utter insignificance of "kosher" diet. Worse still, at a later period he writes to the Colossians denouncing all trammelling the conscience with scrupulosities about meat or drink (Col. ii. 16 seq.). Inevitably, then, theory (a) either impeaches Paul's character for consistency or necessitates the conclusion pressed by destructive German critics, viz. that the whole story of the Council is a fable.

(4) Moreover, this theory really almost stultifies the argument of Peter which prepares the way for the decree (Acts xv. 7-10).

<sup>1</sup> That the scrupulosity about diet discussed by St. Paul in Romans xiv. long lingered is well known. But there is positive evidence for its *dissociation* from Acts xv., despite the natural tendency to connect the dietetic practice with the conciliar decree. Thus if Biblias, the martyr of A.D. 178, is represented in the letter from Lyons and Vienne (Eusebius H.E. v. 1) as alleging against the charge of cannibalism that the Christians were "not allowed to eat even the blood of irrational animals," Irenæus who transmitted and perhaps himself wrote this letter, evidently makes the decree treat of morals not of food, and includes the Golden Rule. Similarly though Tertullian repeatedly refers to this scruple, he makes the rescript a prohibition of the three deadly sins. Cf. Kirsopp Lake, "Earlier Letters of St. Paul," ii. Appendix.

For what is the intolerable "yoke" from which exemption is pre-  
saged by Peter? Circumcision received by the Hebrew in infancy  
was no yoke to him, and for the Gentile proselyte it would  
only involve a short spell of pain far outweighed by the daily *gêne*  
of Jewish kosher rules. Yet this latter yoke is on this hypothesis  
riveted afresh, and apparently in heavier<sup>1</sup> form. Repudiation,  
too, not retention, is suggested by Peter emphasizing "the cleansing  
of the heart by faith," the foil to which is cleansing by purity of  
diet. In fact but for theory (a) we should naturally infer that when  
the Council disowned the Pharisaic busybodies who clamoured for  
"circumcision and the law of Moses," the Gentiles were emancipated  
from both, and that "kosher food" went the way of circumcision.  
Such a sequel squares with instead of contradicting (1) Peter's  
argument, (2) Paul's Epistles, (3) the actual practice of the Church.  
And Luke himself seems to be preparing us for this wholesale  
emancipation in his long and detailed story of Peter's vision and  
its overriding his scruples about meats "common or unclean"  
in Acts x.<sup>1</sup>

II. Theory (a) being thus found unsatisfactory, we turn to its  
rival. Are we in a happier plight if—adopting the Western text  
and striking out the "things strangled" clause—we make the decree  
forbid three special sins?

Readers of Professor Lake's most valuable work on the "Earlier  
Epistles of St. Paul" will recollect the weighty arguments for his  
conclusion that the clause thus elided is no part of the original decree  
but merely an edifying elucidation connecting the word "blood,"  
with an interpretation of the decree as a food law. This conclusion  
I accept. An original three-clause text appears to have been  
touched up by two rival schools of exegesis, the result being in some  
quarters the appearance of the decree in the four-clause form of our  
*textus receptus*; in others its embellishment with the Golden Rule  
of Codex Bezae and the Westerns. Mr. Lake does not accept the  
Golden Rule as an integral part of the text. And with good reason,  
for it is simply inconceivable that, had it been there, any one would  
have succeeded in expunging such high teaching in the interest of

<sup>1</sup> There is no prohibition of "things strangled" in the Levitical law.  
It is even possible that it was not as yet included in the Jewish "kosher"  
regulations, cf. Lake, *op. cit.* p. 55. If so, the argument in favour of the  
three-clause text of the decree is stronger still, and the "Food Law" inter-  
pretation is correspondingly weakened.

religious dietetics. But it is disappointing to find him still maintaining that Western exegesis whose obvious insufficiency needed the insertion of this gloss. Following the Latin Fathers he interprets the decree as a caution against three special sins—idolatry, murder and fornication. And he conjectures that the Apostolic Council had a precedent in some Jewish practice of admitting converts without demand for fuller compliance with Old Testament ethics.

To this theory (b) there are the following objections, which I think most readers will find insuperable.

(1) The supposed Jewish precedent is quite imaginary. Mr. Lake cites the case of King Izates and certain passages in Philo, and a liberal view of the ceremonial law in certain quarters is doubtless thus sufficiently attested. But there is no evidence whatever for the supposed reduction of the moral law to these three essentials.<sup>1</sup>

(2) "Blood" (*αἷμα*) in the decree could hardly have meant "murder" (*ἀφάρτα*) to the Greek-speaking recipients of the decree, despite its afterwards receiving this interpretation in the West. I have examined all the passages in Biblical Greek cited by Resch and Professor Lake in support of such a use of the term. The best, perhaps, is Matthew xxiii. 30—"partakers in the blood of the prophets"—which does not take one far. In all such supposed parallels the context or the verb makes the meaning unmistakable. Such is certainly not the case in the decree of Acts xv.

(3) Even supposing objection (2) met, can we conceive of the ethical demands of Christianity being reduced to abstention from idolatry, murder and fornication? In the age of Charlemagne such an emasculation of moral requisites might pass. But we are at once conscious of its incongruity in a decree emanating from Apostles. What a contrast to St. Paul's catalogue of the things which "if a man do he shall not inherit the Kingdom of Heaven." Or to the stringent distinctions in the "Didaché" between the "Way of Life" and the "Way of Death." Or to Pliny's record of the pledge taken by the Bithynian Christians, "ne furta, ne latrocinia . . . committerent, ne fidem fallerent."

<sup>1</sup> Singularly enough the two passages from the "Sibylline Oracles" adduced by Mr. Lake, viz., iv. 24-34 and iv. 162-170, themselves confute this assumption. In verses 31, 32 the poet demands abstention from dishonest dealings in trade: in verses 166-168 he demands, besides repentance, the same pious practices that Luke attributes to Cornelius in Acts x., viz. prayer and almsgiving.

I have somewhere come across a story of an African convert, who when told by the missionary about the eighth commandment ejaculated, "O! no Massa! Sure good man Moses never gib such silly rule as that." But it was not related that the missionary left him under the impression that he need not include the duty of honesty among "necessary things." Obviously the meagreness of the moral demand made the embellishment of the decree with the Golden Rule imperative. Therefore the admission that this Western reading is a gloss really pronounces sentence on interpretation (b).

III. By this process of exhaustion I come at last to (c). The decree is one of uniform tenor, cautioning these new converts against contamination from the cults of heathenism. The Council, in fact, after relieving its questioners from the "troubling words" of the Judaizers, points out that in another direction scrupulosity is necessary. It cautions against all approach to "syncretism." The transition of thought is natural. We find St. Paul dealing with the same subject in 1 Corinthians. Just such cautions against the dangers of a heathen entourage are continually found necessary in the Mission Field to-day.

Let us take the decree as one of three clauses, though this is not essential to my thesis. In two of them a passage so obviously suggests itself as explaining their collocation that I wonder it generally escapes attention. I refer to Revelation ii. 14-24. "Eating things sacrificed to idols" and "fornication"—this is the *conjoint* charge of St. John against two separate communities, *viz.*, Pergamum and Thyatira (*vv.* 14, 20). In *three* instances, then, "fornication" is associated closely with "idol sacrifices." Surely this cannot be fortuitous. We see at once that the "fornication" stigmatized is not the ordinary sin against Christian ethics considered apart. It is something involved, or at least risked, in all participation with idol sacrifices.

John after reprimanding the Church of Thyatira concludes thus: "I cast upon you none other burden (*βάρος*)" (verse 24). Now nowhere in the New Testament save here and in our decree has the expression *βάρος* this peculiar meaning, and the cheering epilogue "Howbeit that which ye have held fast till I come," is not unlike in tone to that of the decree, "From which if ye keep yourselves it shall be well with you." It is conceivable perhaps then that a reminiscence of the Council and its rescript actually suggests John's

choice of expression. If so, it would be a valuable attestation to the historicity of both. But be this as it may, Revelation ii. sufficiently shows that in Acts xv. not ordinary social immorality is meant, but contamination by way of religious syncretism.

It may be that these Christians at Pergamum and Thyatira attended idolatrous gatherings to which obscene rites were sometimes accessory and that it is precisely this feature in the heathen cults that is contemplated in the conciliar rescript. It is addressed to Syria, Antioch and Cilicia. The notorious obscenities that characterized some of the Syrian cults at once occur to us. "Nulle part" (says Cumont) "l'impudeur ne s'étalait aussi que dans les temples d'Astarté." "Les prostitutions sacrées n'ont été en aucun pays aussi développées qu'en Syrie." Nor is this literal interpretation much less relevant in the cases of Cilicia, or of John's Pergamum and Thyatira, despite the greater spirituality of the Anatolian cult of the Magna Mater. Ramsay has shown how in this religion the central thought was the mystery of the "succession of life," and how one of its accessories was a realistic drama which—however innocent in intention—might well have a demoralizing effect on the spectators, and tend to general licentiousness.<sup>1</sup>

I submit it, however, that in all three passages the "fornication" deprecated is more probably not literal, but spiritual. The coquetting with the heathen rites, whether obscene or not, is stigmatized as "fornication," the harsh and familiar Old Testament metaphor being deliberately appropriated both by the Council and St. John in order to present such syncretism in the blackest colours. This may seem at first a bold postulate. But we have seen that the interpretation of Revelation ii. is determinative of the phraseology of our decree, and in the case of Thyatira one can speak almost decisively. For we note that the "fornication" to which the person or party designated "Jezebel" tempts the Thyatira Christians in verse 20 has become "adultery" when we reach verse 22. The variation is intelligible enough in view of the common interchange of the two figurative terms in Old Testament denunciations of apostasy or syncretism<sup>2</sup>; but it is unaccountable if we interpret John's language literally. The figure is undeniably of rare occurrence in New Testament idiom. But we find St. James denouncing

<sup>1</sup> Hastings' "Dict. of Bible," s.v. "Religion of the Greeks, etc."

<sup>2</sup> E.g. in Jeremiah iii., v.; Ezekiel xvi., xxiii.; Hosea i., ii.

those who would fain always have the favour of the world as "adulteresses" (James iv. 4). St. Paul, too, in cautioning against the ethos of heathenism—and not without this very subject of idol-sacrifices in mind—adopts the yet harsher figure of "incest"<sup>1</sup> in 2 Cor. vi. 14.

The prominence and the sacramental import of "blood" in the heathen religions explains the other clause in the decree. If we connect it with the cult of Cybele it is an instructive fact that only a few years earlier Claudius in his zeal for the revival of this religion had the name "Sanguis" attached in the Roman Kalendar to March 24, in connexion with the resurrection of Attis from the dead, *i.e.* the return of spring. On this day the Manes of Attis were to be propitiated with large libations of blood. In the Syrian cults this mode of propitiation was evidenced habitually in more horrible forms. Children and even adults were sacrificed to Astarté or the Baalim, and these practices long survived Hadrian's attempt to prohibit them.

But to no religion does a decree to be sent to Cilicia seem more relevant than to Mithraism, the future great rival of Christianity. For Mithraism, which, favoured by much Imperial patronage, subsequently travelled as far West as our Wall of Hadrian, had begun its vogue in Cilicia as early as 66 B.C. with the defeat of Mithridates. Cumont in his "Worship of Mithras" tells us how "the fugitives flocking in from the Orient disseminated the Iranian mysteries specially in Cilicia." . . . "Mithra became firmly established in this country, in which Tarsus continued to worship him until the downfall of the Empire." In no cult, moreover, would "blood" be so necessarily in evidence as in Mithraism, where the regenerating "taurobolium" played the same part as the Sacrament of Baptism in Christianity. Prudentius the poet witnessed this revolting initiatory rite. His account is thus presented by Cumont in "Les Religions Orientales," pp. 81, 82.

"Le myste couché dans une excavation recevait le sang d'un taureau

---

<sup>1</sup> Μὴ γίνεσθε ἑτερογενεῖς ἀπλοῖς. It is not unequal yoking of animals that is in St. Paul's mind but the sin of causing procreation between diverse genera. Cf. Leviticus xix. 19. Hebr. *Ló tarbia kitayim*; Sept. τὰ κτήνη σου ὅν κατοχεύσεις ἑτερογένῳ; R.V. "Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind." St. Paul here warns against unrestrained association with unbelievers (not against intermarriage with them) and its probable result—religious syncretism.

érogé au dessus de lui sur un plancher à claire voie. A travers les milles fentes du bois (dit le poète) la rosée sanglante coule dans la fosse. L'initié présente la tête à toutes les gouttes qui tombent. Il y exposé ses vêtements et tout son corps qu'elles souillent. Il se renverse en arrière, pour qu'elles arrosent ses joues, ses oreilles, ses lèvres, ses narines. Il inonde ses yeux du liquide. Il n'épargne même pas son palais, mais humecte sa langue du sang et le boit avidement. . . . Après s'être soumis à cette aspersion répugnante le célébrant, ou plutôt le patient, s'offrait à la vénération de la foule. On le croyait par ce baptême rouge purifié de ses fautes et égalé à la divinité."

How weak-kneed Christians might incur risk of association with the blood of the heathen cults must be left to conjecture. The reference in the decree will obviously be to its supposed virtue, whether propitiatory or regenerative. Accessory to the rites of Cybele and Mithras were probably divers popular practices of asserting faith in the efficacy of the medium. Blood from the Temple may have been employed as a charm or prophylactic. Or it may have been used at the feasts much as holy water is used in the Roman Church. From all such deference, then, whether by way of joining in the feast or honouring the supposedly sacred blood, the decree aims to divert the new converts of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, branding it as spiritual fornication.

St. Paul says nothing about "blood" in connexion with the topic of meats sacrificed to idols, and this omission in 1 Corinthians perhaps confirms my reference above. Greece never took to these repulsive sanguinary rites when imported from the East. The vogue of Mithraism outside Asia Minor is indeed scarcely earlier than the Antonines, and though their last representative, Commodus (A.D. 180), greatly stimulated this religion by his own initiation, only a single find at the Piræus has as yet attested its acceptance in Greece proper. It is easy, however, to conceive of this Apostle dutifully executing the mandate of the Council in his own Cilicia as Luke tells us he did (Acts xvi. 4), and indeed the protest against the propitiatory or regenerative symbols of these cults may well have suggested some of the most characteristic terms in the Pauline theology. Nor perhaps is it quite accidental that we encounter these most often in letters addressed to Christians in Asia Minor. On the other hand, Paul as a conveyer of "kosher" regulations is to me at least a figure simply inconceivable. And not much more attractive is the idea that the great missionary Apostle ever reduced the ethical demands of the Gospel to the modicum presented in

Professor Lake's interpretation, viz., abstention from idolatry, murder and fornication.

ARTHUR C. JENNINGS.

P.S.—To simplify this thesis I have postulated the exclusion of the "things strangled" clause. Much, however, may be said for the authority of the great uncials, and many will be reluctant to defy the principle *Proclivi scriptioni præstat ardua*, in spite of the arguments for a three-clause text so ably presented by Professor Lake. Those who prefer to retain the four-clause text of the decree will find little difficulty in adapting to it the above interpretation; but in this case the emphasis will be on the sacrifice rather than the blood, and the regenerating Mithraic rite noticed above cannot be in the Council's mind, whatever its effect on the diction of St. Paul. The direction will then be—shun the idol sacrifices, alike when these are propitiatory blood offerings and when they are offerings of birds, game, etc., all association with such rites being spiritual fornication.

