



Reading Martin Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian* as Roman Catholics and Protestants Together

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Abstract: In the light of the ongoing efforts for the common commemoration of the Reformation by the Catholic and Protestant Christians, this essay discusses (re-reads) one of the writings of Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, written in 1520. Today, the 16th century Reformation has to be looked at without the burden of its five centuries history, and within the various efforts for ecumenical relationship in the present context. Locating the treatise within the immediate context in which it was written, this essay offers a summary of the treatise particularly focusing on Luther's discussion of works – both his critical perspectives on it when comes to salvation as well as his appreciation for works in Christian life – which can offer important insights for our ecumenical activities today, and invites to read this treatise as Roman Catholics and Protestants together.

Keywords: Martin Luther, Reformation, Freedom of a Christian, Ecumenism, Catholic-Protestant Unity

“The things that unite us are greater than those that divide us” (Pope John XXIII). It is quite an obvious fact that the world today is struggling with various issues

especially in terms of relationships and cooperation between communities, nations, cultures and peoples. The current developments in various parts of the world including USA, India, Turkey and other places are examples for how people are easily persuaded, often successfully, by totalitarian and extremist ideologies which see that communities and people are divided and kept in eternal tensions and conflicts so that the very few power elites can make their ways easily without any hurdles. There are systematic efforts to see that people and communities are filled with hate for each other rather than working for maintaining better relationships among others that are essential for the well-being of both the present and the future.

In such a context of negativities, troubles, conflicts and violence, it is highly remarkable that the two major traditions within Christianity, Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches, troubles between which began a few centuries ago, are now coming together for a common commemoration of the 500th year of the Reformation. This is particularly important and exciting because it is this same event, coupled with various other factors, had led to the very division and conflicts between these two traditions. Thanks to the many ecumenical efforts since the Second Vatican Council among the Roman Catholics and various attempts by and the formation of different ecumenical bodies among the Protestant churches such as the Anglican Communion, World Council of Churches, Lutheran World Federation and the World Communion of Reformed Churches and others, today relatively a better situation has emerged – though still a long way to go – to commemorate an anniversary of the Reformation as both Roman Catholics and Protestants together. In this context, the publication of the joint document *From Conflict to Communion*¹ is a highly remarkable effort which needs to be lauded.

A common commemoration of the Reformation involves a number of developments in Christianity, of course. It first of all involves a critical unlearning of the various available histories of the Reformation and the subsequent developments in Europe and outside Europe – written by both the sides. Most often, as obvious, the histories of the Reformation have been polemic histories accusing each other. While the particularities of each tradition has to be respected and maintained, nevertheless the various histories that often put the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches in a strong binary condition and in a state of inbuilt eternal enmity have to be interrogated. Such histories present the Roman Catholics and Protestant as always fighting and that they cannot come together at all as if they are fundamentally different in all aspects.

Second, a common commemoration of the Reformation also involves studying the Reformation not simply as a division between the churches, but as reformation within its multiple social, political, economic, cultural and other factors with which the event is closely related. Moreover, there were many identities involved in the process of the spread of the Reformation, which made the process even complex, so a simple categorization does not work here. Because of the various histories of the Reformation, a kind of ‘Protestant Martin Luther attacking the Roman Catholic Church’ myth has been strongly built during the last few centuries, and there are recently efforts for challenging such a generalising approach within ecumenical frameworks. By no means, this perspective of looking at the Reformation and the subsequent developments within the complex environment is a new endeavour, but the context of the common commemoration should make such directions in research and historiography being brought to the centre.

Third, the common commemoration emphasises the importance of remembering the past in the present rather than remembering the past in itself. While what happened in the past cannot be changed, how it is remembered in the present

can be influenced in the light of the changing environments and contexts, and this can help different church denominations to come into cooperation and unity.

Fourth, a common commemoration of the Reformation also means that re-looking at the writings of the reformers as well as who were critical of them in new lights. This has to be done, though not easy, without the burden of the five centuries history of the Reformation, and within the various efforts for ecumenical relationship in the present context. This essay attempts to contribute to the this aspect by re-reading one of the works of Luther for how some of the discussions of it can be of helpful for Christians in general in our Christian living.

The Freedom of a Christian, written by Martin Luther (1483-1546) is considered here for the purpose. After briefly discussing the immediate context in which the treatise was written, this essay offers a summary followed by a discussion, in the light of the common commemoration, for how some of the concerns can be critically appropriated by Roman Catholics and Protestants together.

1. The Background of *The Freedom of a Christian*

The Freedom of a Christian comes as the third treatise written by Luther in 1520 followed by *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nations* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Compared to these two, *The Freedom of a Christian* was written rather in a manner in which Luther attempts to make clear how his intention was not to divide from the church, unlike many people around Pope Leo X (1475–1521) had shown it to be. Perhaps Luther kept Johann Eck (1486–1543), a German Scholastic theologian who was vehemently opposed to him, in his mind. This treatise is accompanied with a letter to the Pope Leo X, where Luther expresses his concerns. This letter was very much due to the efforts by Karl von Miltitz (1490–1529), a papal nuncio and

a Mainz Cathedral canon, who persuaded Luther to mend the relationships with Rome.

When read without the burden of the last many centuries polemical histories of Reformation, one can appreciate the many reasons and factors that prompted Luther to write these treatises, particularly this one. Reducing everything to a binary of Martin Luther versus the Roman Church has had dangerous consequences. As a theologian Luther held much importance for doctrine, and once said that ‘take away assertions, and you take away Christianity.’² He thought that these assertions were influenced by various external factors that need to be challenged. Among such factors he was targeting, the Scholastic theological system and Humanism were two of the important developments in his times.

Medieval theology was mostly enveloped by the Scholastic subtleties which were functioning on Aristotelian dialectics and idle speculations. Scholastic theology failed to look at the great doctrines of the gospel, according to Luther.³ Further, the Pelegian idea of salvation that humanity is justified on the basis of its merits also was popular in this time. William of Ockham was of the idea that, God is capable of accepting a sinner directly without the need of any intermediate stage or entity,⁴ and thus did not allow grace or faith to be there between a sinner and God’s justification of him/her. Duns Scotus was another Scholastic theologian whose characteristic was to ‘disturb faith and to open again questions.’ He was also of the opinion that external reward can be achieved by good works, and that human freedom consists in their ability to choose.⁵

Another factor Luther was critical of was the piety of Christians, which, supposed to proceed from the soul’s union with Christ, was mainly depended on the mechanical performances. Good works were done only with selfish motives of reward, he held.⁶ In this regard, some of the internal factors he was critical of were: the authoritative priesthood which replaced the individual conscience and the virtue of faith,

and the preaching the Word of God which was neglected and which mostly had reference to indulgences, alms, pilgrimages and processions.⁷

Apart from the external factors that were present in Luther's time, the other important personal factor that led Luther to write this treatise was his own personal experience. The struggle he took for understanding the righteousness of God was enormous one and this obviously was influencing him to develop his doctrine of 'justification by grace through faith alone' and particularly to write this treatise on freedom which mostly discusses the doctrine of faith.

Thus, primarily, in *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther continues discussing his personal struggles in seeking a justification from a righteous God, and offers a very long discussion of the importance of faith and not works. Then, very interestingly, he discusses the importance of works not as a means of salvation, but as fruits of being a believing and faithful Christian. He attempts to show how the works are important for being and living as a Christian. At the end Luther argues against those who glorify works and claim that the works are needed for salvation, and also against those who completely despise works. Luther invites Christians to strike a middle path.

2. An Open Letter to Leo X

Along with the treatise, Luther writes a letter to Pope Leo X. In the letter, he attempts to make clear that he does not have any problem with the church concerning its morals and so with Leo X. His problem is regarding the word of truth; the Word of God. He is deeply concerned that there should not be any fixed rules for the interpretation of the Word of God. It should not be bound because it teaches freedom in all matters. He is critical of the Roman Curia, and in doing so Luther almost seems like advising the Pope regarding his office and equalling his letter with Bernard of Clairvux's letter

to Pope Eugenius III (1145-1153) where Bernard discussed the duties of the Pope and the dangers connected with his office. He holds that the power of the Pope is to serve others. In spite of such advisory nature of the letter, by and large, the letter seems to be one of mending relationships and makes it clear that Luther's intention was not to separate from the church. Church historians comment that it is not clear the letter as well as the treatise ever reached the Pope.⁸

3. The Freedom of a Christian: A Summary

When referring to his treatise on 'The Freedom of a Christian' in his open letters to Leo X, Luther says that 'it contains the whole of Christian life in a brief form.' Luther's whole treatise is based on his understanding of faith as against works. Briefly speaking, the whole of this treatise spells out the importance of faith for Christian life and discourages any idea that works can replace faith. Luther formalises his whole treatise on the basis of the following propositions:

- A Christian is perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
- A Christian is perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

These two theses, says Luther, even though seem to contradict each other, should be found to fit together in order to serve the purpose. On this basis he divides his treatise into two: discussion on inner man and discussion on outer man.

3.1 Inner Man (Human)

Human beings have a two-fold nature. One is the inner or spiritual which is identified as Soul. The other is the outer or bodily which is called flesh. Luther has taken it from II Cor. 4: 16, where Paul says 'though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed everyday.' The inner man is righteous and free and according to Luther, an external thing has no influence in producing Christian righteousness and

freedom or producing unrighteousness and servitude. Soul is not affected by the body and body is not affected by the soul.

Soul does not need anything for its righteousness or freedom except the Word of God. Word of God is the Gospel of God concerning God's Jesus Christ, and faith alone can be the 'saving and efficacious use of the Word of God'. (Rom. 10: 9). The Word of God cannot be received and cherished by any works but only by faith. Since, thus, the soul needs only the Word of God and faith in it, it is justified or made righteous only by faith and not by any works.

The process of justification by faith in the soul happens as follows: Once one starts to have faith he/she knows that he/she is sinful. Once the knowledge of sinfulness arises, the knowledge of the necessity of Christ for the justification occurs. Once one believes him, through this faith he/she becomes a new man/woman and it is justified by the merits of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the unbelief of the heart, and not any outer work, makes one guilty and damnable servant to sin.

Having discussed this, Luther provides three kinds of power of faith. In order to discuss the first power, he starts with a question that is raised against his above position – justification only by faith. The question is this: If faith alone justifies what is the use of so many works, ceremonies and laws that are prescribed in Scripture? Luther answers to this saying that Scripture can be divided into two: commandments and promises. Commandments tell us what we should do, but do not provide us the power to do it. They teach us our inability to do good and prove that we are sinners. But promises help us to be saved. If we wish to fulfil a commandment, we have to believe in Christ in whom grace, righteousness, peace and freedom are promised. Thus the promises of God gives what the commandments of God require, and we receive these promises in faith. Thus a Christian has everything in faith for

his/her justification of the soul and needs nothing apart from it. This is the first power of faith.

The second power of faith is that it honours one whom it trusts. So when the soul believes God's promises it honours God and regards God as truthful and righteous. In turn, due to the faith of the soul, God honours it by making it righteous. Thus faith works righteousness by giving God what belongs to God.

Thirdly, faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. Christ is full of grace, life and salvation, and the soul is full of sin, death and damnation. A believing soul can claim everything what Christ has as its own as a bride does with her bridegroom. Thus faith comes between the soul and Christ, and sin, death and damnation are Christ's while grace, life and salvation are soul's. Adding to this we also receive a two-fold honour which Christ has made possible for us: priesthood and kingship. Through faith we receive kingship, which is a spiritual power that makes us lord of all things and the priesthood which is possible for everyone.

Luther urges that one should not stop with preaching the works, life and words of Christ as mere historical facts. The knowledge of these alone is not enough for justification. Rather Christ should be preached to the end that faith on him is established in one.

3.2 Outer Man (Human)

Even through faith we do not become wholly inner and perfectly spiritual. Rather it happens only at the last day – the day of the resurrection of the dead. As long as we live in flesh we can only make progress towards future. But the fact that we live in flesh in this world indicates that we have a contrary will in our own flesh. As we are placed among our neighbours, we have to control our bodies and have dealings with our neighbours, so that it will obey and conform to the inner man

and faith and will not revolt against faith and hinder the inner man. Because the contrary will in the body always seeks its own advantage. However the good works by the body never helps for justification.

In this section, Luther talks about three kinds of works of a justified person. As ‘good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works,’ a justified, freed person does good works. So whatever one does, he/she does it out of pure liberty and freely. Any work done is done not for salvation, for salvation has been already received, but done freely. For Luther, with what expectation we do work is important. This is the work done for one’s own self.

Second kind of work is the work towards one’s neighbours. As one does not live for oneself but for others, to this end, one has to bring one’s body into subjection that one may sincerely and freely serve others. Here faith is active through love. However one’s works towards one’s neighbours also do not bring justification or righteousness. By serving the neighbours without expecting any reward, one is satisfied with the fullness of faith. Here one should follow Jesus Christ as an example in freely serving others.

Third kind of work is the work which pleases God. It is not that through our work we please God so that God justifies us, but that because God has justified us and given God’s riches in our faith, we do things that please God. Thus works towards God and works towards neighbours stem from the righteousness which we receive by faith. And for Luther, any work that is not done for the purpose of keeping the body under control or serving one’s neighbours, that work is neither good nor Christian. The moment we think that we are justified by our works the Christian freedom perishes altogether.

In the last part of his treatise Luther rebukes both those who criticize the ceremonies, traditions and human laws

thinking that they are free and those who innocently follows the ceremonies, traditions, etc, thinking that they are saved by them. Luther urges the (freed) Christian to take a middle course and offend the former and educate the latter. We should not despise ceremonies and traditions, but we should use them as models and plans among builders and artisans. Models are important for constructing a building; but once the structures are over, the models should be laid aside. They are not permanent. In the same way ceremonies, traditions and works in our Christian life are important; but they should not be regarded as something which brings justification or righteousness in our souls. Faith only can make this and this is the freedom of a Christian.

4. *The Freedom of a Christian: A Contemporary Evaluation*

One of the crucial developments in the contemporary context due to various ecumenical efforts is to attempt for a self-critical reading of Luther's writings, rather than merely seeing them as being always directed to the Roman Church. Such a reading brings out the strengths and the limitations in Luther's thought, and open up a space for how his ideas and theologies can be critically appropriated for Christians today. Below, I attempt to offer an evaluation within such a framework.

At the outset, as stated earlier, *The Freedom of a Christian* should be understood within the context of Luther's personal spiritual struggle he had with the idea of righteousness or justification. In 1545, in his preface to his Latin writings, he wrote: "I hated the (that) phrase righteousness of God, which I had been taught to understand as the righteousness but which God is righteous, and punishes unrighteous sinners. Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with my works. Far from loving that righteous God who punishes sinners, I actually hated him."⁹ Luther went on to say that, as he

continuously meditated upon it, he found that ‘righteousness of God’ meant that the righteous person lives by the gift of God (faith), and ‘the righteousness of God is revealed’ meant that the merciful God justifies human beings by faith. It is through his own personal struggle against the works that make God justify us, Luther came to the understanding of the justification by faith.¹⁰ True, Luther was not alone in having such a struggle, and most of the people in his time too had the same struggles. Obviously, ‘what should one do for his/her salvation’ was an important question of Luther’s time. Hence Luther himself considered his works on freedom, the bondage of human will and justification by grace through faith alone as more important than any other of his works or of his difficulties with the church and papacy.¹¹ This point is significant, because in the history of Reformation, however, Christians from both the sides have concentrated far too much on the latter aspects.

Secondly Luther’s main aim, as he shows in this treatise, was to attempt for a purification of theology from the Scholastic and Humanistic line of thinking. Once he regarded human work as a precondition for justification. But once he realized that justification was God’s work and human beings had nothing to do with that except believing Christ, he looked at the whole of theology from this view point. Whatever came against this, he considered dangerous and poisonous.¹²

In this relation, Luther’s dispute with Erasmus on free-will, which ended in Luther writing a treatise on *The Bondage of the Will* also should be considered. Luther writes it five years after his treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian*, and this also is considered as one of the important works of Luther. Erasmus had defined free-will as “a power of the human will by which man may apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from the same.”¹³ Luther opposed this and denied of any free-will. Accordingly, to him, the denial of free-will is “the foundation of the Biblical doctrine of grace, and a hearty endorsement of that denial is the first step for anyone who would understand the Gospel and come

to faith in God.”¹⁴ While Erasmus maintained that though sin weakened humans, it has not made them utterly incapable of meritorious acts, Luther held that meritorious acts can never earn justification. For him the individual sinner is incapable of self-justification.

In Luther’s view, sin and righteousness co-exist: “we remain sinners inwardly, but are righteous extrinsically, in the sight of God.” When we confess our sins in faith, we stand in a right and righteous relationship with God. Thus we are growing towards righteousness. The righteousness helps us, being a protective covering, to battle with our sin. As the gradual transformation takes place in believers, there is the possibility of the future elimination of sin. For Luther, sin basically points to the ‘continued need to entrust one’s person to the gentle care of God.’ Luther therefore declares a believer is “at one and the same time righteous and a sinner.”¹⁵ For him it is basically a declaratory and judicial act of God: it is a ‘judicial act of heart and will.’¹⁶

The reformation Luther intended mainly was the reformation of the dogmatic Christianity, as he himself accepted, even though its effects could be found in the ecclesial levels also. Luther was mostly concerned with the doctrines, particularly the doctrines that were related to the questions at the psychological level. Questions like, “Am I saved?,” “How have I been saved?,” “Whether my works have anything to do with my salvation?” were some of the important questions for him and many people during his time. However, these are very much applicable to the question of the individual sin. Luther seemed to be less concerned with collective sin. He did not take seriously the collective sin that was found in his own time against the present. Thus, though Luther’s idea of the freedom of a Christian, i.e., the justification by grace through faith alone may answer to some of the questions at personal and individual levels, its practicality in terms of community life is limited.

Luther's differentiation of soul-body relationship is based on the dualistic idea. He differentiates between both in the first part of his treatise where he discusses about the 'inner man,' but brings some relationship between the two in terms of their dependency in the second part where he discusses about the 'outer man', and thus seems to contradict. Further, in Luther's view, righteousness and sin co-exist. Is it possible, when there is both dependency and non-dependency between the soul and the body? Even though one is declared righteous, he/she is not wholly inner or spiritual according to Luther. There is only imperfect faith, but taking the righteousness as a protective covering, one progress towards transformation. Then what is faith? And where does lie its source? Even though Luther talks about the power and functions of faith, a clear definition of faith is lacking, which may not be easily possible.

In the treatise Luther is critical of a passive submission to faith. The only place the faith comes active is in one's relationship with one's neighbour. Here the faith is active through love. However he does not allow this to have any influence with the righteousness or justification. Justification is only God's act. God commands and God God Himself fulfils by God's own promises. In between commanding and fulfilling lies the justification of a sinner in faith. If God does everything what is the use of human life and how does one bring the 'Godself' or the qualities of God in human life?

5. Reading *The Freedom of a Christian* as Roman Catholics and Protestants Together

One of the most important aspects that has to be considered in looking at this text is how the treatise is basically building on the personal struggle of Luther, rather than simply initiating or following up a doctrinal controversy with the church. The personal struggle that Luther went through is common to all Christians – be they Roman Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox. The questions that occupied Luther mostly were:

‘am I justified?’; ‘how I am justified?’; ‘how do I feel relieved from the bondage of sin’ and similar questions. In spite of the availability of many doctrines, dogmas and sacraments, Christians continue to live with these questions which in fact are unavoidable in Christian being and living. These are not questions of doubt and disbelief. Thus what we, Roman Catholics and Protestants together can appreciate is the personal spiritual struggle that Luther was undergoing, and we can draw parallels to our own lives. His reflection and contemplation on justification by faith and grace and not by works, come from these genuine spiritual struggles rather than a partisan polemic against the Church.

Second, today, after 500 years of various polemic histories of the Reformation and oppositions to it, it is easy to find points in the text which can be used as a Protestant attack on the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the treatise and the letter to Leo X where Luther calls the pope his Father make clear his intention that it was not to separate from the church. Rather he was presenting his arguments more as a self-critique of a faithful member of the church. Luther was clear that he was talking about the church, and highlighting some of the issues that can be improved, as a member of the church rather than as an outsider. In this way, his reflection on the importance of faith and the limitations of works can be seen as self-criticism, rather than pitting one against the other.

Third, as we see in the text, Luther is not attempting to take extreme sides when it comes to works. While he is clear that our works cannot save us because it is ultimately God’s grace that saves us – with which no Christian should have a problem – he nevertheless clearly affirms the importance of the works for being and living as a Christian.

Fourth, Luther’s discussion of works in Christian life as serving one’s neighbours, and not directing the works for one’s own benefits, has important message for all Christians. Especially, his discussion of consideration of others, and

works aimed not at one's own salvation but for the sake of the welfare of the others are common to all Christians. It is, after all, the basic scriptural message which has been clearly asserted and reasserted by Jesus Christ, Paul and the other apostles. This emphasis on work aimed at the welfare of the others, itself seems to have contributed to the division of the church, has in fact insights for ecumenism if one wants to, for, after all, ecumenism is not a concern for oneself but involves the wellbeing of everyone with the cooperation of the other.

Fifth, a reading which is not influenced by the polemic Reformation history can show that Luther was *clear in relating to the church rather than separating from it*. The way he talks about the Christian community united by the works of the believing Christians has the roots for the many ecumenical activities that we are currently undertaking to bring together Christian communities. If read from this light, rather than a political and politicised history of the Reformation, Luther's treatise has a lot to offer for all Christians who are open to come forward to embrace ecumenism and cooperation.

This does not mean that the text is entirely non-polemic or that it was not at all influenced by the realities and affairs of the time – political, social, economic and others. But a reading of this treatise as we move from conflict to communion can be read differently to draw critical insights for all Christians in our common journey.

Conclusion

In short, Luther's personal struggle that come out clearly in his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian* is common to all Christians. Luther has attempted to live faithful to the gospel which is important. Even though the treatise is believed to have given rise to the dividing elements in the church, and in fact it has been used for forcing divisions and conflicts, today a non-polemical reading that overcomes the centuries of 'history of reformation' by both the sides will help us to understand and

appreciate that there can be a number of insights learned from this treatise for personal lives of Christians as well as for the ecumenical activities we are involved in.

Notes

- 1 The Lutheran World Federation and The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*. Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt GmbH and Bonifatius GmbH Druck – Buch – Verlag Paderborn, 2013).
- 2 J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will* (London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1957), 4.
- 3 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol. 7*. (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 9.
- 4 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 452.
- 5 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol. 7*, 683-688.
- 6 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol. 7*, 10.
- 7 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol. 7*, 9.
- 8 See Timothy J. Wengert, *The Annotated Luther*, Volume 1: *The Roots of Reform* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2015), 469-70.
- 9 McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 454.
- 10 McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 454.
- 11 Packer and Johnston, *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will*, 41-42.
- 12 Gerhard Ebling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 210.
- 13 Packer and O. R. Johnston, *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will*, 48.
- 14 Packer and O. R. Johnston, *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will*, 44-45.

15 McGarth, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 458.

16 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol. 7*, 21.

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