

PAUL'S CONCEPTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

IV. THE EPISTLES TO THE CORINTHIANS.

IN these Epistles the controversy between Paul and his opponents takes the form of an attack and a defence of his apostolic standing, and of his personal character in connection therewith. The advocates of a Judaistic Christianity do not seem to have made in Corinth any direct attempt to induce the members of the Church to submit to the rite of circumcision, or any other part of the Jewish law, probably for the simple reason that such an attempt in that centre of Greek life would have been futile. They appear to have confined their efforts at fostering a legal temper to questions of detail, such as the eating of meats offered to idols. Amid the Greeks of Corinth, with their liberal instincts, the anti-Paulinists would be obliged to pursue their end, the destruction of a free independent Christianity, by a circuitous course. They could not, with hope of success, teach their own doctrines, but they might assail the man who taught doctrines of an opposite nature, might blacken his character, and plausibly deny, or cunningly undermine, his apostolic standing. The spirit of the people gave them a good chance of success in this bad line of action, for the Greeks in general, and the Corinthians in particular, were volatile, opinionative, addicted to party spirit, and to the faithlessness and heartlessness which that spirit usually engenders.

There is very little bearing on the great controversy to be found in the first Epistle, which treats mainly of the multifarious disorders and irregularities of the Corinthian Church, the various questions of casuistry therein debated, relating to sacrificial meats, marriage, the dress and deport-

ment of women, etc., and an eccentric opinion entertained by some concerning the resurrection. Only a few slight hints occur here and there of the presence of a hostile element bent on undermining the Apostle's influence and authority, such as the reference to the parties into which the Church was divided,¹ the allusion to some who were puffed up because they thought the Apostle was frightened to visit Corinth,² and the abrupt manner in which, in the ninth chapter, the writer, in interrogative form, asserts his apostolic dignity and privileges.³ Were it not for the prominence given to the element of self-defence in the second Epistle, one might even legitimately doubt whether these stray hints did really imply the existence in the Corinthian Church of a mischief-making Judaistic section; but in view of the peculiar contents of the later Epistle, it seems proper to attach more significance to them than we should otherwise have done. It is, of course, quite conceivable that between the writing of the first Epistle and the date of the second, a new situation had emerged, that a party of legalists had in the interval arrived on the scene and created other work for Paul than that of correcting Corinthian abuses. Thus we might explain why there is so little in the first Epistle of that which constitutes the peculiarity of the second. But the fact might be otherwise accounted for. It may be due in part to the circumstance that in his first Epistle Paul had so many urgent matters to write about, that the personal question was crowded out; in part to his adversaries not having as yet found their opportunity, so that their presence in the Church might meantime be disregarded, or alluded to only in a distant manner.

However it is to be explained, the fact certainly is, that the allusions to a hostile party in the first Epistle are very

¹ 1 Cor. i. 11, 12.

² 1 Cor. iv. 18.

³ 1 Cor. ix. 1-6.

slight and vague. What is said concerning the divisions in the Church is far from clear. How many parties were there, and what were their respective characteristics? Baur reduces them to two, a Petrine and a Pauline, the other two being varieties of these, or the same party under a different name; the Petrine party *e.g.* calling itself now after Peter the chief of the original apostles, now after Christ, to imply that in their view companionship with Jesus was an indispensable qualification for apostleship.¹ According to Holsten, those who called themselves after Christ were a distinct party, consisting of strangers who had come into the Church, men who had personally followed Jesus, belonging indeed to the Seventy, therefore claiming the title of apostles.² It is assumed by both these writers that the divisions rested on a doctrinal basis, which, however, is denied by others, who think that they amounted to little more than personal preferences.³ The whole subject is enveloped in obscurity, but the probability is that there was a Judaistic leaven in the Corinthian Church even when the first Epistle was written, as it is certain there must have been at the date of the second.

On this view we can best understand 1 Corinthians ix. 1-6, though that Paul is on his defence is far from self-evident even in this passage, especially as it stands in the correct text, according to which the question, Am I not free? comes before the question, Am I not an apostle? According to this reading the reference to the apostleship and its rights comes in simply as an illustration of the maxim previously laid down, that a Christian must sometimes deny himself the use of an undoubted liberty. The only

¹ *Vide Paulus der Apostel*, i. 291-8.

² *Vide Das Evangelium des Paulus*, pp. 196-232, where there is a very able discussion of the question, Who were the Christ party? Holsten finds the proof of his view above stated, in 2 Cor. x.-xiii., the whole of which he regards as a polemic against this party.

³ So Sabatier.

thing that makes us suspect that the Apostle has something more in his mind is the abruptness with which the reference to the apostleship comes in, and the strange emphasis with which the theme, once introduced, is insisted on. While ostensibly only illustrating a general doctrine concerning Christian liberty, he drags the apostleship into the discussion as if desirous to speak of it for its own sake, and he makes statements regarding it which seem irrelevant to the previous connection of thought, in a tone that nothing going before accounts for. "Have I not seen the Lord Jesus? Are not ye my work in the Lord? If I be not an apostle to others, yet at least I am to you, for the seal of my apostleship are ye in the Lord." Why such questions and assertions, unless some were calling in question his claim to be an apostle?

Statements introduced in this indirect passing manner, could not satisfactorily dispose of the subject to which they referred. Nevertheless, in the light of the ampler treatment in the second Epistle, one can discover in the ninth chapter of the first the leading points of Paul's apology for his assailed apostolic standing. I am an apostle, he says in effect, because (1) I have seen the Lord,¹ (2) I have been signally successful in my preaching,² (3) I have endured hardship in the cause. The hardship he has in view is the obligation imposed on him by the state of feeling in the Church to refuse support and to work for his own livelihood.³ Now when we pass to the second Epistle we find that what Paul there says on the same topic amounts simply to an expansion of these three arguments.

In proceeding to consider the eloquent and triumphant apologetic of that Epistle I begin by remarking that the whole defence rests on the general axiom that the quali-

¹ 1 Cor. ix. 1.

² 1 Cor. ix. 2.

³ 1 Cor. ix. 7-12.

fications for the Christian apostleship are spiritual, not technical. In this respect there is a close resemblance between Paul's argument in defence of his apostolic standing and the argument of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in defence of the priesthood of Christ. In both cases the presumption from a legal point of view was against the position defended. Christ possessed none of the legal qualifications for the priesthood. In like manner Paul's qualification for the apostleship might well appear questionable. He had not been one of the companions of Jesus. On a *primâ facie* view, that was a grave defect in his title; for not to Judaistic prejudice alone, but to right reason it could not but appear important that the authoritative teachers of Christianity should be able to say from their own knowledge, "thus spake and acted the Lord Jesus." It is indeed obvious that, as eye-witnesses of Christ's personal ministry, the eleven were authorities in a sense in which Paul could not pretend to be authoritative. But how then does he vindicate his claim to rank with the Eleven as an apostle? Let us see.

1. His first line of defence is that *he has seen the Lord*. "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" asks he in the first Epistle, alluding primarily to the vision on the way to Damascus, but not to that alone, or perhaps even chiefly, as we can gather from various texts in the second Epistle. He lays chief stress, in reality, on the vision of Jesus with the eye of the spirit, the insight he has gained into the true meaning of Christ's whole earthly history. Sufficient vouchers for this statement may be found in 2 Corinthians iii. 18, and iv. 6, which tell of the writer's unveiled view of the glory of the Lord, and of an inward illumination granted to him worthy to be compared to the illumination of the world when God uttered the creative fiat: Let there be light. Paul's contention, virtually, is that the vision of the spirit is more important than the vision of the bodily

eye; that indeed the latter without the former possesses no value. His tacit assumption is that the vision of the spirit is possible without the vision of the eye, and that there may be a vision of the eye unaccompanied by the vision of the spirit. If these positions be admitted, then there is no reason why a Paul should be behind the chiefest of the apostles. In matters of fact pertaining to the life of Jesus, their testimony, of course, possessed unique authority. But were they necessarily entitled to speak with exclusive or even superior authority as to the religious significance of the facts? Their claim to be heard there would depend on the measure of their spiritual illumination. But the question between Paul and his opponents was precisely this: Who is the most authoritative and reliable interpreter of Christ's mind? It was not, who is most likely to know the facts, but who best understands the facts. And Paul's claim was that he possessed an understanding of the facts at least equal to that of the eleven. And to that claim it would have been an utter irrelevance to have objected: Ah, but you never were a companion of the Lord like Cephas. It would have been an irrelevance of the same kind as it would be to say to a man of genius, "It is impossible you can be a great poet, for your father was not a man of wealth or of rank." It would have been to lay stress on what was at best a matter of prestige, in a spirit of vulgar worldliness; in Paul's own words, to make knowledge of Jesus *after the flesh*¹ the one thing needful. It would have been, in short, to make the definition of apostleship turn upon something outward, in which case Paul could only make his opponents welcome to the name, and claim for himself the substance, the right, viz., to come before the world as an independent interpreter of the Christian religion.

¹ 2 Cor. v. 16.

But does Paul's argument not prove too much? On naturalistic principles it certainly does. The scope of his argument, interpreted by naturalism, is, "Every man an apostle who has spiritual insight, Luther not less than Paul. No man an absolute authority in matters of faith, not Paul any more than Luther, but each man authoritative according to the measure of his light." Paul did not mean to go this length. He regarded the apostles as exceptional characters, not merely in view of the measure of their inspiration, but because they were eye-witnesses of the resurrection. Hence the stress which he lays on the fact of having himself seen Jesus, not only in 1 Corinthians ix., but also in the fifteenth chapter of the same Epistle, where he enumerates the appearances of the risen Christ. He was not wrong in attaching importance to that fact in connection with the vindication of his apostleship. For no one who believed that the alleged appearance of Jesus to the persecutor on the way to Damascus was a reality, would be disposed to deny that its final cause was to convert a bitter enemy of the faith into a divinely commissioned preacher of it. Of course it was open to Paul's opponents to deny the reality of his vision; probably they did deny it, resolving the event into a purely subjective impression, as was done in later days, in writings of intensely anti-Pauline bias like the Clementines. But they could not well admit the objectivity of the Christophany, and deny the inference to apostolic vocation.

2. The second line of defence is *success in the work of the apostleship*. Paul says much of his success as an apostle to the Gentiles, and that not merely by way of stating facts, still less in a spirit of idle boasting, but consciously and seriously in the way of argument and self-defence; as if to say, "Providence has set its seal upon my ministry." He hints at this part of his apology in the first Epistle, as when he says to the Corinthians, "If to others I am not an

apostle, yet at least I am to you, for the seal of mine apostleship are ye in the Lord"; and again when he writes, "By the grace of God I am what I am; and His grace which was bestowed upon me was not found vain, but I laboured more abundantly than they all."¹ But it is in the second Epistle that he develops the argument so as to do it full justice. It is the main theme of the remarkable passage beginning at chapter ii. verse 14, and extending to the end of the third chapter.² The argument worthily opens with the words, "Now thanks be to God who causeth us ever to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest by us the savour of His knowledge in every place."³ They are in the heroic style, and suggest the idea of a great victorious general receiving a triumphal entry into the city in honour of his victories, followed by a train of captives marching towards their fate, some to deliverance and some to death. It looks like boasting, but it is boasting in self-defence; therefore, though conscious, and frankly owning, that he is using language of self-commendation, he yet boldly employs it; and to make the argument from success more telling he gives it a personal turn by appealing to the effect of his work among

¹ 1 Cor. xv. 10.

² We might even include in this section chapter iv. 1-6.

³ 2 Cor. ii. 14. The word *θριαμβέοντι* has caused much trouble to interpreters. I retain the rendering of the A.V. as best suited to the connection of thought, though recent writers, while admitting its suitableness, reject it as contrary to usage. That similar verbs are sometimes used in a *factitive* sense is not denied (*e.g.* *βασιλεύω*, 1 Sam. viii. 22), but it is contended that *θριαμβέω* is never used in this sense, but only in the sense of triumphing over one, as in Colossians ii. 15, the only other instance of its use in the New Testament. But the basis of induction is narrow, and the question is just whether the connection does not justify us in finding an instance of the *factitive* use here. In any case we must think of Paul as sharing the triumph of God, not as triumphed over; as at least an incense bearer, not as a captive (*vide* the translation of the passage in *the Scripture for Young Readers*, 1892). I cannot close this note without referring to Professor Findlay's article on the word in THE EXPOSITOR for December, 1879, in which he ably contends for the Greek sense as distinct from the Roman, according to which the reference is not to a military triumph but to a sacred procession of enthusiastic worshippers led by the inspiring God. The stress on this view lies on the Apostle's *enthusiasm*, not on his success.

the Corinthians themselves. "Are we beginning again to commend ourselves, or need we, as do certain persons, epistles of commendation to you or from you? Ye are our epistle, written in our hearts, known and read by all men."¹ The certain persons referred to are of course legalist opponents, whose manner of action Paul loses no opportunity of contrasting with his own. They brought letters of introduction from influential men, coming not to preach the Gospel but to neutralise his influence. He needed no such letters, at least among Corinthians; the success of his labours, as evidenced by their renewed hearts, was all the commendation he required.

The apostle would have the Corinthians carefully consider what this success meant, and takes pains in the sequel to make them understand its significance. It was, he tells them, a proof of sufficiency or fitness for the work. For when he asked, "Who is sufficient or fit for such a ministry?"² he did not mean to suggest that no one was. He himself claimed to possess the necessary aptitude. He disclaimed only a sufficiency self-originated. He devoutly ascribed his sufficiency to God; and just on that account he assigned to it very great significance, as revealing a Divine purpose. When God fits a man for a work He calls him to the work, such is the Apostle's argument. Drawn out in full his logic is to this effect: It is not an accident that a man succeeds in the work I have on hand. Success proves fitness, and fitness in turn proves Divine vocation.

One would like to know how Paul defined sufficiency. He has anticipated our wish and given a full satisfactory answer to our question. The gist of his answer is that sufficiency or fitness for Christian apostleship consists in insight into, and thorough sympathy with, the genius of the Christian religion. Thus the second line of defence runs up

¹ 2 Cor. iii. 1, 2.

² 2 Cor. ii. 16.

into the first ; brilliant success springing out of clear vision. The sentences in which the Apostle gives practical proof of his insight and appreciation form one of the golden utterances of this Epistle.¹ It is the one passage in the two Epistles to the Corinthian Church kindred in its doctrinal drift to the teaching of the Epistles to the Galatian and Roman Churches concerning the law. It is a two-edged sword which may be used either for defence of Paul's apostleship, or in defence of his conception of Christianity. If his apostleship be admitted, then we have here an authoritative exposition of the nature of Christianity. If the correctness of the exposition be conceded, then it makes for Paul's apostleship, for he certainly possessed qualities fitting him in a peculiar degree to be the propagator of such a religion. Paul's own mind seems to oscillate between the two lines of inference. At first the apologetic interest seems to be in the ascendant ; but when he has once entered on a description of the economy whereof he claims to be a fit minister, he forgets himself, and launches out into an enthusiastic eulogium of New Testament religion, as the religion of the *spirit*, of *life*, and of *righteousness*, as opposed to legalism, the religion of the letter, of death, and of condemnation, so giving us an utterance not merely serving a temporary apologetic purpose, but of permanent didactic value. Whatever impression it made on the Corinthian Church, it leaves no doubt in our minds as to Paul's peculiar fitness to be an apostle of the Christian faith. Who so fit to propagate the religion of the spirit, of life, and of justification by faith, as the man who had by bitter experience proved legalism to be indeed a religion of condemnation and death, and to whom Christianity had come as a veritable year of jubilee, proclaiming liberty to the captives and the opening of prison doors to them that are bound? Of this experience, however, the Apostle *says* nothing here, though

¹ 2 Cor. iii. 6-11.

doubtless he thinks of it as he writes. It suits his purpose rather to refer to another element of sufficiency, *straight-forward sincerity*, standing in contrast as it does to the double dealing of his opponents. His argument now takes this turn. The religion of spirit and life, eternal because perfect,¹ has nothing to hide; the better it is known the more acceptable it will be; it is only the religion of written rules, and legal bondage, and fear, that needs a veil to cover its inherent defects. I therefore am congenially outspoken, as becomes the servant of a religion, not of mystery, but of light, bright and glorious as the sun. I am not one of your huckstering merchants who adulterate their wares.² I convey the truth in Jesus, in its simplicity and purity, from land to land; in this differing from my opponents, who mix gospel and law to the injury of their customers. Not only am I sincere, speaking nothing but the truth, but I am frank, speaking the whole truth, herein differing even from Moses, who put a veil on his face. At this point Paul may appear to lapse into a Rabbinical way of thinking, but the thought wrapped up in his allegory of the veil is clear, and as precious as it is clear. The law did not announce its own transitoriness; it could not afford to do so. It had to practise reserve to uphold its authority. If it had said plainly, I am for a time, I am but a means to an end, it would have encouraged disrespect for its requirements. Therefore, just because it was a defective religion it had to be a religion of mystery. Christianity, on the other hand, needs no such veil; the more plainly its ministers speak the better. The frank man is the fit man, the most successful, the God-appointed.

3. But the treasure is in a fragile earthen vessel,³ and that may seem to detract from the fitness. Far from admitting

¹ 2 Cor. iii. 11.

² 2 Cor. ii. 17: *καπηλεύοντες*, another of Paul's strong graphic words in this context, found here only in the New Testament.

³ 2 Cor. iv. 7.

that it does, however, Paul rather insists on the fact as a third argument in support of his claim to be an Apostle. "I have," he says in effect, "earned the right to be regarded as the Apostle of the Gentiles by manifold sufferings endured in connexion with my work." He has already used this argument in his Epistle to the Galatians, expressing it in these pathetic terms: "Henceforth let no man trouble me, for I bear branded on my body the marks of Jesus."¹ The words, as Hausrath finely remarks, suggest the picture of an old general who bares his breast before his rebellious legions, and shows them the wound-prints which prove that he is not unworthy to be called their commander.² The Apostle resumes the plea and urges it with great force and with much iteration, in the Epistle now under consideration, the passages in which it recurs rising to the dignity and grandeur of the greatest utterances to be found within the whole range of tragic poetry, and constituting together what might not unfitly be called the "Pauline Iliad." The first of these impassioned outbursts begins at chapter iv. ver. 7, and, running through a series of bold paradoxes, ends by comparing the life of the writer to a slow, cruel crucifixion, or to a continual descent from the cross.³ The Apostle returns to the theme again in the sixth chapter, this time entering much more into detail. Appealing to the Corinthians to see to it that they receive not in vain the message of reconciliation so earnestly delivered by his lips, he backs up the appeal by a reference to those manifold sufferings which at once gave him a claim on their consideration, and commended him as a true Apostle.⁴ In a third passage of similar character, in the

¹ Gal. vi. 17.

² *Neutestamentliche Zeitgeschichte*, vol. ii., p. 584.

³ So Stanley (*St. Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians*), who takes *véκρωσω* to mean not "dying" nor "death," but "deadness." "It is as if he had said, We are living corpses. It is a continual 'Descent from the Cross.'" "

⁴ 2 Cor. vi. 5-10.

eleventh chapter,¹ he reaches the climax of his argument from tribulation, taking occasion there to mention some particulars in his history not elsewhere alluded to, one being that five times he had received from the Jews forty stripes save one.² He is not ashamed to mention such ignominious facts, he rather glories in them, because they all tend to vindicate his claim to be the divinely-commissioned Apostle of the Gentiles. It is even possible that in enduring such evil treatment at the hands of the Jews, he was glad to have an opportunity of bearing for Christ's sake what he had made others bear, as a sort of atonement for past sin.

The chapter from which the last citation is made is one of four (chaps. x.-xiii.), which are distinguished from the rest of the Epistle by a bitterly controversial tone. The difference is so marked as to have suggested the idea that they originally formed a distinct letter, the very letter indeed referred to in 2 Corinthians vii. 8, which is there spoken of as having by its severity deeply wounded the feelings of the Corinthian Church. The suggestion, though not without plausibility, is not hastily to be adopted. The diversity between the two parts of the Epistle can easily be reconciled with its unity by the supposition that in the earlier part the Apostle has in his view mainly the faithful majority in the Corinthian Church who had supported his authority in the case of discipline, and were generally friendly to him, and that after he had written what he had to say to them in a tone of gentleness, he turned his thoughts to the minority and the men by whose malign influence they had been misled, and dealt with them as they deserved, with a rod rather than in a spirit of meekness.³

¹ 2 Cor. xi. 23-33.

² 2 Cor. xi. 24.

³ Heinrici (*Das zweite Sendschreiben des Apostel Paulus an die Korinther*, 1887) points out that if the Epistle had ended with the details about the col-

These four chapters contain copious materials bearing on all the three branches of Paul's argument in defence of his Apostleship. To the first head, the argument from insight, belongs chapter xii. 1-6, where he boasts of the visions and revelations he had enjoyed more than fourteen years previous to the date of the Epistle, that is about the time of his conversion. To the second head, the argument from success, belongs chapter x. 12-18, where the Apostle refers to the wide area over which his missionary labours had extended. It is noticeable that he emphasises the *pioneering* character of his work not less than its extent; here again, as in so many other connexions, with an eye to the contrasted conduct of his opponents. They could point to no churches founded by their efforts, but only to churches already established which they had sought to disturb and corrupt by their sectarian animosities and legalist doctrines. He, on the other hand, had never entered on another man's province, taking up work already begun, either to further or to mar it, but had always broken new ground. Which of the two modes of action was most worthy of an Apostle he would leave them to judge. To the third head, the argument from suffering, belong, over and above the passages already cited containing the long catalogue of woes, all the places in which Paul alludes to his refusal to receive from the Church of Corinth any contributions towards his maintenance. His adversaries appear to have put a sinister construction on this refusal, suggesting that it sprang from his not feeling quite sure of his ground. "He calls himself an Apostle," so they seem to have argued, "why then does he not use his privilege as an Apostle, and claim maintenance from his converts like the other apostles? Evidently it is because he is afraid lest his pretensions should

lection for the poor in chapter ix., it would have been a fragment, and that chapters x.-xiii. were necessary to explain and justify the hard judgments incidentally pronounced in the earlier chapters on the character of the Judaists.

not be recognised." Thoroughly selfish themselves, these base-minded men could not so much as imagine the generous motives by which Paul was really actuated. They took for granted that he would be glad to get money from all the Churches if he could. They seem even to have gone the length of insinuating that he did get it in a round-about way; that in fact that collection for the poor in Palestine, which he was always making such a fuss about, was merely a scheme for getting money into his own pocket while pretending to be very independent. Such seems to be the plain sense of chapter xii. 16-18, the first sentence giving the substance of what Paul's enemies said of him and some members of the Corinthian Church were base enough to believe. "He does not burden us with his maintenance: no, not directly; but he is crafty, catches us with guile, in connexion with that collection." Feeling keenly the humiliation of being obliged to answer such a charge, Paul replies: "Did I make gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you? I asked Titus to go, and I sent with him the brother. Did Titus overreach you? Walked we not in the same spirit, in the same steps?" The Apostle's true motive in the whole matter of his support was a noble spirit of self-sacrifice, which, itself divine, was a sure mark that his mission was from God. The suggestion of his enemies, that if he were sure of his apostolic standing he would demand a maintenance, resembled Satan's suggestion to Jesus: if thou be the Son of God command that these stones be made bread. If thou be an Apostle, said these children of Satan, command the Churches to support thee. But the reasoning was as inconclusive in the one case as in the other. Jesus showed Himself to be the Son of God just by refusing to turn His Sonship to His own advantage. Paul showed himself to be an Apostle of God by refusing with equal steadfastness to set his personal interests above the public interests of

the Divine Kingdom. Though he was an Apostle he was willing to suffer in every way, and by that will to suffer for God's glory and man's good, he gave the most convincing evidence that he was a true Apostle; not one who arrogated the dignity to himself, but called of God thereunto.

In the foregoing statement we have been occupied exclusively with those parts of the two Epistles which bear on the question of the Apostleship, and have met with little that throws light on Paul's conception of Christianity. The doctrinal element is indeed not abundant even for one who is in quest of it. It is however not altogether wanting. Besides the important passage already referred to exhibiting a contrast between the legal and the Christian dispensations, the second Epistle contains two striking *logia* bearing on the significance of Christ's death. These are, "If one died for all, then all died,"¹ and, "Him who knew not sin, He made sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."² These great Pauline words show two complementary aspects of the Apostle's doctrine of the Atonement. The first Epistle contains, in the eighth and fifteenth chapters, important contributions to the doctrine of Christ's Person.

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¹ 2 Cor. v. 14.

² 2 Cor. v. 21.