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

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

*JESUS' ESTIMATE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.*

MANY attempts have been made to appreciate the spiritual influences which told upon Jesus during the years in which His life is hidden from us. He had, of course, like all Jews, the great inheritance of the Old Testament ; and if we may judge from the evangelists, He had been peculiarly impressed by Deuteronomy and the Psalter, by "the Second Isaiah" and the apocalypse of Daniel. How His environment affected Him—what the early interactions of His spirit were with the various types of popular religion—we cannot easily tell. The only one of His contemporaries by whom He was deeply impressed, and on whose appearance he reflected profoundly, was John the Baptist. John is in his mind from the beginning of his career to its close, and His thoughts about John throw a vivid light on His consciousness of Himself. It is by comparison and contrast with John that He shows us what He Himself is.

To begin with, Jesus had an immense sympathy with John. When Luke introduces the Baptist's ministry it is with the Old Testament formula, which occurs here for the first and last time in the New Testament, "the word of God came to John" (Luke iii. 2). With this estimate of John Jesus was in agreement : to Him John was a true prophet. His conviction that the Kingdom of God was at hand, and that it must be prepared for by repentance, was one which Jesus unreservedly shared. Perhaps no one can tell how the word of God comes to a man—how the immediate religious certainty is given to him that God is about to do something decisive, that a crisis in man's relations with God is impending, and that it is "now or never" if men are to come safely through it. Such a certainty, however, with all its strain and exaltation, was the very element in which

both John and Jesus lived, and we can well believe that the sense of it in the Baptist's preaching attracted Jesus to him. When they came face to face, although they must have had some such consciousness of their relative positions as is implied in Matthew iii. 14 f., the ground they held in common would only seem the more important. If He had not heartily believed in John's mission and message, Jesus could not have submitted to be baptized by him.

The baptism, however, has a significance of its own. If Jesus could not have accepted it unless He had believed in John, the wonderful experiences which accompanied it must have magnified, even for Him, the greatness of the prophet by whom it was conferred. John in his preaching habitually distinguished baptism in water from baptism with the spirit, but in the case of Jesus the two baptisms coincided. The baptism with the spirit was part of the same experience as the baptism in Jordan. From that hour a new divine power invested Jesus. He could do mighty works, such as He had never done before, such as the Baptist himself was never able to do; He had seen the heavens opened, and heard the Father's voice pronounce Him the well-beloved Son. If we have the revelation here of that in which Jesus transcended John, standing alone among the children of men and above them, we must nevertheless remember that the revelation was made to Jesus Himself in connexion with His acceptance of John's baptism, and must have given Him a new conviction of the unique place which John filled in the carrying out of the purposes of God. It was through him that the new era was ushered in; and though its character might in the long run prove to have transcended John's anticipation, that did not alter the fact that he had stood, so to speak, at its threshold, and heralded the King. If Jesus thought of Himself as the Messiah, He would naturally think of John as His forerunner—the prophet who should come

in the spirit and power of Elijah (Mal. iv. 5) to prepare the way of the Lord.

The strong impression made upon Jesus by John is reflected to some extent in the language common to both. John addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees, according to Matthew (iii. 7), the multitudes, according to Luke (iii. 7), as *γεννήματα ἐχιδῶν*; and the same terrific expression occurs on the lips of Jesus in Matthew xii. 34, xxiii. 33. Both have the sentence, "Every tree that beareth not good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire" (Matt. iii. 10, vii. 17). Both have the figure of gathering the wheat into the granary, and of burning the chaff or the tares (Matt. iii. 12, xiii. 30). The axe is laid at the root of the tree in Matthew iii. 10 and also in Luke xiii. 7-9. It may be said that these are commonplaces of pictorial preaching, found also in the Old Testament, and possibly due to the evangelist rather than to proper historical tradition, but in view of the known relations of Jesus and John such suppositions are gratuitous. All the probabilities are, that not only in his fundamental convictions about the imminence of the Kingdom and the true preparation for it was Jesus in thorough sympathy with John, but that through that sympathy He appropriated instinctively some of the vivid features of the Baptist's speech. It does not derogate from His originality that He did so, any more than that He found in the Old Testament the forms of thought and language He required to body forth His mind to men. He attached Himself to John as a living representative of God, and He caught in his company some reflection of his living and characteristic tones.

This unity of John and Jesus is what strikes one at the outset of the Gospel. It is not, however, a permanent or unqualified unity. On the contrary, no sooner has John been "delivered up" and Jesus come forward independently than differences emerge. One of the earliest scenes in the

Gospel narrative (Mark ii. 18 ff. ; Matt. ix. 14 ff. ; Luke v. 33 ff.) directs attention to these differences. The disciples of John fast, while those of Jesus do not, and the difference is submitted to Jesus for remark, perhaps by John's disciples themselves. It is assumed that the disciples in each case represent the practice or the spirit of their masters, and it is implied that those who fast can hardly reconcile with moral earnestness like their own and the Baptist's what they evidently regard as a lower type of life. The answer of Jesus vindicates Himself and His disciples, but without making any reflexion whatever at the cost of John. It is entirely free from resentment or even from criticism. "Can the children of the bridechamber fast as long as the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. But days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in that day." It has long been customary with some critics to question the last sentence here on the ground that it is irrelevant, and depends upon an "allegorizing" of the parabolic saying of Jesus: the taking away of the bridegroom is a gratuitous and unmeaning supposition unless the bridegroom is first identified, allegorically, with the Speaker. But as Wellhausen has remarked, the first sentence is just as meaningless and inapplicable as the last unless it is allegorically interpreted, i.e., unless we admit that Jesus somehow identified Himself with the bridegroom of His pictorial utterance. On the strength of this observation Wellhausen consistently goes all the way with his critical logic, and denies that Jesus spoke any of these words at all. It is not imputing motives to say that the motive of such criticism is clear. It lies in the assumption that Jesus could not say things either about Himself or about His death which imply that an incomparable and solitary significance belongs to Him and to it in the relations of God and men. If we

reject this assumption—and unless the Christian religion is to be pronounced a complete mistake from its birth, we are bound to reject it—we have no reason to doubt that Jesus said what the evangelists here ascribe to Him. The point at present is that according to these words the mood of Jesus and His disciples was that of a marriage party, a mood quite unlike that of the Baptist and his adherents. In spite of that early sympathy with John which is not disclaimed, Jesus is filled with the sense of something new, original, and joyous. He does not so much defend it as take it for granted. It is not to be judged or measured even by John. It is like new wine which is not to be put into old bottles, like unshrunk cloth which is not to be used to patch an old garment. No attack is made on the old even while its right is asserted for the new. On the contrary, one of the evangelists has preserved in this connexion a beautifully tolerant saying of Jesus in which we can read his indulgence for those who, having been trained in one religious habit, find it hard to renounce it even for a higher. “No one who has drunk old wine wants new; for he says, the old is good” (Luke v. 39). *Good, not better*, is the true reading; a tolerant, not a censorious, lover of the old is entitled to equal tolerance from those who have discovered the worth of the new. In these utterances we see Jesus, without the slightest touch of censure or disparagement, take His stand apart from John, and in the single, significant word “bridegroom” hint at His own unique place.

The relative attitude of Jesus and John, as we should infer it from this passage, is emphasized in that to which we now proceed. If it were legitimate to make comparisons in such matters, it might not be rash to assert that the eleventh chapter of Matthew is the most wonderful page in the life of Jesus. Where besides can we find words so original, so unmistakably attesting themselves as the vehicle

of revelation, so charged with the goodness and the severity of God, so spontaneous, poetic, inimitable? The close parallelism of Matthew xi. 2-19 and Luke vii. 18-35 shows that the part of them with which we are here concerned goes back to that common source of Matthew and Luke which has generally been regarded by scholars as the most ancient and authoritative record of the words of Jesus. It is occupied throughout with John the Baptist, and it contains an express appreciation and criticism of him by Jesus.

John has heard in prison the works of Jesus—works so congruous to the Messianic character that the evangelist calls them directly the works of the Christ—and sends by his disciples to ask, “Art thou he that should come, or must we expect another?” It has become a tradition of criticism to assume that this question represents the first emergence in John’s mind of the idea that Jesus might be the Christ, and that he submits his nascent faith to Jesus Himself for approval or disapproval. Of course this is quite inconsistent with the account given by Matthew of the baptism of Jesus, and it is not every critic who has the candour and the courage to say with Johannes Weiss that the evangelist “has manifestly forgotten” what he said in the third chapter, and that here he pays tribute to the truth of history, unconsciously and almost against his will, by showing that John in the first instance knew nothing of the Messiahship of Jesus and at most only suspected it from afar.<sup>1</sup> Even an evangelist is not to be discredited without cause, and there is no good cause for supposing that the writer of our first Gospel had forgotten anything. He knew that all faith is open to trial, and that under the stress of trial it may prove even in the greatest spirit to be at fault, and it is such a fluctuation of faith that he here exhibits in John. The mention of the

<sup>1</sup> *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments*, i. 291.

prison by Matthew is not in vain. The hopes which John had cherished of Jesus at an earlier date languished in Herod's dungeon: he felt less able to believe that the destined King of righteousness was in the world when Jezebel could still crush Elijah. This, which we must assume to be the meaning of the evangelist, is also the mood to which the answer of Jesus is addressed. He refers the Baptist's messengers to His works: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, to the poor the Gospel is preached." To Jesus Himself, as to the evangelist, these are "the works of the Christ"; what He does identifies Him as what He is. Nor must we say that these are all ethical works which have been materialized into miracles by unintelligent reporters. They are *δυνάμεις*, or mighty works, such as further on in the chapter are said to have been done in Bethsaida, Chorazin and Capernaum; they attest the continual presence and operation in Jesus of the Divine power with which He was endued at His baptism. Happy is he to whom they do not appeal in vain.

Perhaps we are too apt to read the closing words of Jesus' answer, "Blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me," as if they were only a warning. They do indeed contain a warning, and in that sense they are less appropriately addressed to incipient faith, feeling its way to Jesus through perplexing thoughts, than to faith which is in danger of lapsing to lower levels of hope and insight. As a warning, therefore, they suit the evangelist's understanding of the situation, and not that of the critical tradition above-referred to. But they are as much encouragement as warning. A beatitude of Jesus always describes a rare and high felicity, the felicity of a heroic virtue, and it is this to which John is summoned in his despondent hour. It is not for Jesus to break the bruised reed or quench the glimmer-



ing wick ; on the contrary, He appeals to the native courage of the man not to forfeit the happiness which is within his reach. It was difficult to think that the destined Liberator was there, and yet to rot in prison ; but no one—not John nor Jesus Himself—is too good to suffer for righteousness' sake ; and happy are they who, when they see Jesus at work, cannot be put at fault about Him by any personal considerations whatever.

The evangelists connect with this appeal of John to Jesus an express appreciation of the Baptist by our Lord (Matt. xi. 7 ; Luke vii. 24). There is no reason whatever for questioning this connexion, even though later references to John in what seems the same discourse may be due to compilation. John had been a great figure in the recent religious history of Israel ; great responsibility attached to all who had been in contact with him, and yet many had dismissed him from their minds only too easily. As the fourth Gospel has it, He was the lamp that burned and shone, and men were willing *for a season* to rejoice in his light (John v. 35). It is this temporary interest which is ominous to Jesus. In a striking parable he compares those who had yielded for a time to John's influence to the man from whom the evil spirit departed only to return to his untenanted abode with seven other spirits more malignant than himself (Matt. xii. 43-45). The forgotten prophet has brought himself again for a moment into the public mind by his message to Jesus, and Jesus avails Himself of the occasion to bear a striking testimony to him, a testimony which must have awakened in the consciences of all who had heard John the sense of responsibilities to which justice had yet to be done.

What, he asks, did you go out into the wilderness to see ? a reed shaken by the wind ? In spite of the dubious attitude of the Baptist to Jesus, as suggested by his question,

this was no description of the man. But it may quite possibly have been one of the pleas on which his appeal to conscience was discounted. Nothing is commoner than for men to assume that the person through whom a spiritual movement is initiated must be an easily excited, hyper-sensitive, hysterical person. The settled order of life, it is argued, the solid common sense of mankind, is not to be discomposed because some light or shallow nature sees visions or dreams. If religion did not over-stimulate such a nature, something else would, and in any case we pass it by. But although this assumption is commonly made it is commonly wrong. Excitable and fickle natures may become prominent in a revival, but the real conductors of spiritual force are of another type. It would be difficult to name more level-headed persons than John Wesley and D. L. Moody. The Baptist, Jesus implies, was the very opposite of a reed shaken with the wind. If passing excitability was to be spoken of, it was in the hearers of the desert prophet, not in the steadfast preacher himself.

Another ironical question follows, probably with a similar moral point. "What did you go out to see? a man clothed in soft raiment?" This also suggests a way in which the prophet is still discredited. His disinterestedness is called in question. To say he is clothed in soft raiment, though his camel's hair or sackcloth is conspicuous, means that he is feathering his own nest somehow; he is getting what he wants out of his prophetic calling; he is made much of in ways which are dear to human vanity; he travels and is handsomely entertained without expense; he has a royalty on the hymn-books; he is flattered and deferred to; the sense of his own importance grows upon him and he enjoys it. Very likely there were people who hinted at charges against John conceived in this spirit, but for Jesus he was beyond suspicion. He was as disinterested

as he was strong. If we wish to find men wearing soft raiment, we know where to look for them, but it is not where John is to be found.

With His next question Jesus drops irony entirely. "What did you go out to see? a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and far more than a prophet." It is hardly necessary to take this as signifying that the multitudes who went out to see John did so in the vague expectation that he might possibly be no less than the Messiah (Luke iii. 15; John i. 20);<sup>1</sup> Jesus is rather expressing His own opinion about John than their former expectations. It is to him that John is at once a prophet and far more than a prophet—a true messenger of God, and yet one who stands in such a relation to the final accomplishment of that purpose of God which is attested by all the prophets as sets him in a place apart and confers on him an incomparable distinction. It is difficult to understand how Jesus could define this greatness by applying to John the words of Malachi iii. 1 in the peculiar form in which they occur in all our Gospels (Matt. xi. 10; Mark i. 2; Luke vii. 27), and it is quite possible that Matthew xi. 10 is due to the evangelist.<sup>2</sup> This does not, however, throw any uncertainty on the greatness just ascribed to John, a greatness in respect of his place and calling in the carrying out of God's purpose. This is secured both by the connexion which we have already seen between the baptism of Jesus by John and His entrance on His Messianic work, and by the subsequent identification of John with Elijah (Matt. xvii. 12). But in the solemn and emphatic words which follow Jesus

<sup>1</sup> So recently J. Weiss.

<sup>2</sup> The difficulty is that in Malachi Israel is addressed, in the Gospels the Messiah; which necessitates changing "before me" into "before thee." There is some doubt as to the order of the sentences in Luke. See the readings of D in Luke vii. 26-28. From this it has been inferred that ver. 27 did not originally stand in Luke, and therefore did not stand in the source common to the first and third Gospels; that is, it is an interpretative addition by Matthew to the words of Jesus.

assures us that the personal greatness of John was adequate to his high place. "Verily I say unto you, there hath not arisen among them that are born of women a greater than John the Baptist." It is an extraordinary estimate of the wilderness preacher, and the shock of astonishment with which we hear it is not abated when Jesus adds, "Yet he that is but little in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

It is idle to evade, or to try to evade, the contrast which is suggested by the last words. It is in principle the same as that which we have already seen when the question was raised about fasting. It is part of the consciousness of Jesus that with His own appearance on the stage of history a new era has dawned, the privileges and blessings of which transcend all that man has hitherto known. He speaks here, in pronouncing upon John, in precisely the same mood as when He says to His disciples, "Happy are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For I tell you of a truth, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and saw not, and to hear what you hear, and heard not" (Matt. xiii. 16 f.). Jesus habitually spoke of His disciples as "these little ones," *οἱ μικροὶ οὗτοι*: and here He says that even the least of them, the one who by comparison with the others is the less, *ὁ μικρότερος*, is greater than John. Having entered into the enjoyment of the privileges and blessings which are identified with the presence of Jesus in the world he stands on a spiritual level to which the greatest of prophets, as long as for any cause he is even momentarily at fault about Jesus, has not attained. There is no disparagement of John in this; what it reveals is Jesus' sense of His own transcendent significance in the spiritual world. The kingdom of heaven, in the sense in which it is here spoken of, is conceived to be present where He is present; a place in it is conditioned by a certain relation to Him, and exalts its possessor above all that has hitherto been

known of spiritual worth and greatness. Even the least in it is greater than the greatest who has only prepared its way.

When we come to what follows in Matthew xi. 12-15, it is probable we have to do with compilation by the evangelist ; at least there is no evident connexion with what precedes. The subject is still John, and the speaker Jesus, but the occasion may have been later. The very terms, indeed—"from the days of John the Baptist until now"—have led some to argue that the days of John are evidently conceived as belonging to a remote past, and that the speaker, therefore, cannot be Jesus, who only survived John a few months. It is the Church, we are told, which is reflecting here on its own history in relation to the work of John, and expressing its mind on John's significance and on the good (and evil ?) of the movement which originated with him. Even of those, however, who are nonplussed by the expression "from the days of John the Baptist until now," some have found it hard to refuse to Jesus the main proposition, "the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and violent men seize upon it." With all its opaqueness it has the ring of originality which attests the master. The parallel in Luke (xvi. 16) shows that in the earliest record of the teaching of Jesus there was a saying currently ascribed to him in which the kingdom of God was connected somehow with the idea of *βιάζεσθαι*. In Luke it is made quite unambiguous. "From that time—i.e., from the time of John—the kingdom of God is preached, and every one forces his way into it." The "force" used is presumably that which is necessary and proper to secure entrance—the response to Jesus' command, "Strive to enter in at the strait gate." In Matthew it is perhaps fair to argue that the meaning is the same. The second clause—*βιασαὶ ἀρπάξουσιν αὐτήν*—must be allowed to interpret the first ; in other words, *βιάζεται* in the clause *ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν βιάζεται* is passive. The kingdom of heaven is the

object to which force is applied ; men who have summoned up all the force at their disposal seize it as their prey. The general idea is that a powerful spiritual movement had originated with John, which when these words were spoken was not yet spent. Perhaps in the choice of terms like *βιάζεσθαι* and *ἀρπάζειν* there is an ironical allusion to the aspect which this movement presented to those who did not participate in it. It was the publicans and the harlots, Matthew tells us elsewhere (chap. xxi. 32), who believed John, and entered the Kingdom of God before the professedly pious ; and we can well believe that to the latter the whole spiritual movement of the time seemed an audacious invasion of what they regarded as a preserve of their own. The publicans and the harlots—people like Zacchæus, or like the woman of whom we are told in Luke vii. 36 ff.—stormed their way into a place which the respectable had set apart for themselves. There is a touch of scorn in the words with which Jesus describes the movement as from their point of view. The *βιασταί*, the *ἀρπάζοντες*, in spite of these questionable names, were His friends. It is part of the greatness of John that a movement so powerful actually dates from him. His “ days ” need not be distant, if only they are past ; and they were past not only when the evangelist wrote, but within the lifetime of Jesus. As Jesus looked back to those early days when the voice of the prophet first stirred the souls of men in the wilderness of Judæa, and thought of the irresistible impulses which it had generated, and how it had fallen silent for ever, it is not difficult to believe that He spoke the words of the verse exactly as they stand. The chronological interval may have been short, but chronology is not the only measure of time. Jesus saw John in his place in a divinely guided history, a place of critical importance. He stood on the borderline between the old and the new, of both and yet of neither. The law

and the prophets fulfilled their function *until* John, but with John the new day began to break. To some it might be a hard saying, but he was the true Elijah who heralds the day of the Lord (Mal. iv. 5 f.). Again it must be repeated, Jesus reveals *Himself* here even more signally than He interprets John. He can speak of John as Elijah only because He thinks of Himself as Messiah. The Messiah may not, any more than the Elijah, answer exactly to Jewish anticipations, but for this He is prepared. John's destiny is untoward, and so will His own be (Matt. xvii. 12). As on many other occasions where more is meant than meets the ear, he adds the arresting word, "He that hath ears, let him hear."

What has just been said covers the reference to John in the last week of our Lord's life when he was challenged at Jerusalem to tell by what authority He taught and acted (Matt. xxi. 23 ff.). If the Jewish authorities had dealt fairly with their consciences in relation to John, they would have had no difficulty about Jesus. It only remains to refer to the passage in which Jesus most explicitly contrasts Himself and John. It is that in which He reproaches His contemporaries with a childish wilfulness that will not be in earnest with goodness in any form. No matter how God appeals to them, they will find reasons for evading His appeal. "John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He has a demon." That is, "It is not sane to behave in this way. It would bring society and civilization to an end. All we can do is to ignore it." "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold, a man gluttonous and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners." That is, "There is no trace of piety here. This is not a religious life at all. Rather is it a life which insults and flouts religion, and which the good are entitled to resent on that ground." It is not easy to understand a scholar who finds in these words the mind of the Church, not the mind of Jesus,

merely on the ground that the past tense is used—John came, the Son of Man came. If anything is certain in the Gospels, it is that Jesus reflected on his coming, and did it in precisely this form. “I came not to destroy, but to fulfil.” “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” “The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.” So here, “The Son of Man came eating and drinking.” He came on the level on which men lived, taking life and the world as God had made them and as His brethren had to face them, discovering or evoking in those whom others despised the root of good things toward God. This is *His* greatness. He does not here, any more than elsewhere, disparage John; on the contrary, according to the most probable interpretation, John and Jesus are both presented here as children of the Divine Wisdom; and diverse as they are, Wisdom is justified in sending both. Even amid that childish generation their labour is not in vain.

It is perhaps a fair inference from the fact that John's disciples long survived as an independent religious party, that John himself died without defining his relation to Jesus further. In the fourth Gospel he figures simply as a witness to Jesus; yet when he is asked whether he is Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, he answers No. Nothing could show more clearly the ambiguousness of his situation. Jesus, we conclude, knew him better than he knew himself, and had a sense of his greatness, both in function and in character, which in himself would have been improper. It has been too much the custom to use him simply as a foil to Jesus, and to contrast his mind with that of our Lord as at all points narrow and unspiritual, but there is something in this which is quite wrong. The least in the kingdom of heaven is, no doubt, greater than he, but we wrong John himself, and we wrong the judgment of Jesus concerning him, if we do not along with this truth catch upon our minds



the sense of an astonishing spiritual grandeur. How can any one speak lightly of a man who so profoundly impressed Jesus ?

JAMES DENNEY.

*ΕΝΕΡΓΕΙΣΘΑΙ IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.*

THE active voice *ἐνεργεῖν* occurs in the New Testament twelve times, *ἐνεργεῖσθαι* nine. Translators have all taken the latter form for the middle voice, and have rendered both exactly alike, by *operator* in the Vulgate and *work* in the English Revised Version. There are considerations, however, which might incline us to take *ἐνεργεῖσθαι* as a passive. One would scarcely expect St. Paul to use the two forms indiscriminately in the short Epistle to the Galatians. The promiscuous use of *αἰτεῖν* and *αἰτεῖσθαι* is not an analogous case.

In the Septuagint *ἐνεργεῖν* occurs six times and *ἐνεργεῖσθαι* once ; 1 Esdras ii. 20, *ἐπεὶ ἐνεργεῖται τὰ κατὰ τὸν ναόν*. Here it is clearly passive. In ecclesiastical Greek *οἱ ἐνεργούμενοι* means demoniacs. Here again the verb is passive. In classical Greek the form is rare, but seems always to be passive. As all the external evidence is thus in favour of the passive voice, not a single instance of an undoubtedly middle being found, so far as I know, there is a presumption that the usage in the New Testament may be the same. We may therefore examine the various passages and see if a passive rendering of the word suits the context and is in agreement with the general teaching. They would read thus :—

James v. 16. "The supplication of a righteous man availeth much if it is wrought in him," sc. by the Holy Spirit. Moulton (*Prolegomena*) says the Revisers had in