

CRITICAL NOTE ON 1 JOHN v. 16.

“There is a sin unto death; *not concerning this do I say that he should make request.*” So the Revisers have translated the latter clause of this Verse; with the assent of most commentators. Thus Meyer paraphrases: “My exhortation does not mean that intercession should be made in connection with sins unto death.” Haught expounds: “Prayer must be offered only in case there is no sin unto death involved. When I have the impulse to pray for an erring brother, this constitutes the assurance that his sin is not unto death. When this strong confidence of petition is wanting to the Christian, οὐ λέγω ἵνα αἰτήσῃ”; where it will be observed that the passage is misquoted. The actual words are “οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης λέγω ἵνα ἐρωτήσῃ.” Now this current rendering of the passage has to face three difficulties. (1) It makes ἵνα a mere connective, without any purposive force. (2) It gives to ἐρωτᾶν a meaning which it has nowhere else in the New Testament; as will be shewn in due course. (3) It does not at all obviously fit in with the context, particularly with the following Verse. Let these points be considered in order:—

(1) ἵνα is translated as merely introducing the noun sentence, the object of λέγω: “I do not say *that* he should make request.” It can hardly be denied, though Meyer does deny it, that ἵνα has this use in certain passages in the New Testament; but its prevailing meaning is that which it possesses in Classical Greek, viz.: “in order that;” and it should always receive that meaning where it is possible to give it. In the three Epistles of St. John there are twenty-five occurrences of ἵνα; in sixteen of these it has its purposive meaning beyond a doubt; in six it follows the demonstrative pronoun and introduces a clause in apposition thereto: as, e.g. 1 John iii. 11, “This is the message . . . *that* we should love one another;” an idiomatic use peculiar to this Writer. In Chap. ii. 27, it somewhat similarly follows a noun (χρεῖαν); and in Chap. i. 9, the purposive meaning may very well be maintained. There remains only our own passage, where there would seem to be no difficulty in giving it its proper force: “I do not speak about this *in order that,*” etc. It rests upon those who defend the current rendering to shew why the ordinary usage of the Writer should in this case be departed from. It is true that the change leaves λέγω

without an object; but this is no difficulty, as we have four instances of its absolute use in the Gospel of St. John, viz.: ii. 21; xi. 13; xiii. 18, 22; in each of which it is, as here, followed by *περί*; for the change of rendering suggested includes the taking of *περὶ ἐκείνης* with *λέγω*, not with *ἠρωτήσῃ*—which accords much better with the order of the words.

(2) The meaning of *ἠρωτᾶν*. The current rendering gives it the meaning of prayer, or request from man to God; practically the same as that of *αἰτεῖν* in the earlier part of the Verse. Surely the Apostle did not change the word without some purpose. Meyer remarks: "It is noteworthy that John uses not *αἰτήσῃ*, but *ἠρωτήσῃ*; *ἠρωτᾶν* is a weaker word; when the Apostle warns us against *ἠρωτᾶν*, he naturally does so still more against the stronger *αἰτεῖν*"—not a very satisfactory explanation. Of course it cannot for a moment be maintained that *ἠρωτᾶν* always has in the New Testament, its classical meaning of "to question;" it certainly does often signify "to request." But it must be remembered that it is *never* (this passage being reserved) used of prayer addressed by man to God. It is used of requests from the disciples to Christ, but not requests which were in any sense prayers; but rather incidents of conversation: *e.g.* St. John iv. 31, "The disciples *requested* him, saying, Master, eat." It is used of requests addressed by the Greeks to Philip; by the Jews to Pilate; by Christ Himself to Peter; by the king's invited guests to the servants; by one king to another; and so on. It is a word not of prayer between man and God, but of conversation between man and man; where it is used with reference to Christ, it is not, so to speak, in his Divine capacity. The one exception is most significant; it is used of prayer, in six cases, by St. John; but all these are in one prayer, the prayer of the God-man Himself; a prayer from God to God; a prayer where the offerer was the Peer of the Object (John xvii.). A careful analysis shews that the word is never used of prayer from man to God. In the face of this fact, strong reason should be shewn before giving it such a force in this passage.

(3) There is no need to do so; its ordinary meaning gives as good a sense, and fits in better with the context: "I do not speak about that (viz. sin unto death) in order that he *may ask questions*;" may begin to ask about this and that sinner, "Has he committed the sin unto death? May I pray for him or not?" "No," says the Apostle: "all unrighteousness is sin;" sin you can discover

easily enough, and know it when you see it; "and there is a sin not unto death;" let that be your warrant for the hope that your prayer will not be in vain: but do not waste time in unprofitable discussions and questions as to what the sin unto death may be, as to who has and who has not committed it. Such would appear to be the natural connection of the two Verses; whilst the usual translation gives no obvious explanation of Verse 17. It is true that there is no other New Testament example of the absolute use of *ἔρωτᾶν* in this sense; but an exactly parallel and indubitable instance will be found in the LXX rendering of Deuteronomy xiii. 15: *καὶ ἐτάσεις καὶ ἐρωτήσεις καὶ ἐξερευνήσεις σφόδρα, κ. τ. λ.*

The rendering here suggested may not be the right one; but it has at any rate the merit of obviating some of the difficulties both of the translation and exposition of the passage; and it therefore deserves at least a passing notice from the commentator on the Epistle.

EDWARD H. SUGDEN.
