James 5. 13-20. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 27 November 2011.

The set reading for this morning comes from James chapter 5, verses 13 to 20.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save him who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Confess therefore your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is very powerful in its effects.

Elijah was a man of like feeling to us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings a sinner back from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Well, you can hardly have missed that our short reading – of just eight verses – is positively bristling with words and expressions, the meaning and interpretation of which are – to say the least – not immediately obvious.

Over the past weeks, mention has been made more than once of Martin Luther's famous description of James's epistle as 'an epistle of straw'.¹

I think I can claim, in terms of passages in this epistle to expound – if you will excuse the play on the word 'straw' – that I have drawn the short straw!

For what it is worth, I see our passage, not as many do, as a series of disconnected parts, but as one whole – held together, as I hope to show, by two threads – the more obvious being the subject of prayer, and the less obvious (but no less real) being the subject of God's chastisement on the believer who sins – whether that sin is against another believer or consists of wandering away from God and His truth.

In support of my view that the passage is to be viewed as one single piece, I would point to the way that it is bound together by the words 'anyone among you', which open both the first section (occurring twice in verses 13 and 14) and the last section (occurring as it does in verse 19).

I described the one thread – that of prayer – as being fairly 'obvious', because direct mention is made of prayer in every verse from verse 13 to verse 18 – seven mentions in all ... which match the seven mentions of patient endurance in the passage immediately before (verses 7 to 12) which David dealt with last week.²

I have seen these two sections together neatly headed as saying, 'When the battle's at its hottest, hang on in there and call for air support'. I like that.

In our passage, we find the individual praying, the elders praying, other believers praying, and the prophet praying.³

I will draw attention to the less obvious thread of God's dealings by way of chastisement and discipline in the life of the sinning believer as we make our way through the passage.

As we have noted over the weeks, James places considerable emphasis on the use of the tongue.⁴ And his closing exhortations (from verse 7 onwards) are no exception.

Your tongue, James is saying, shouldn't be used for complaining about or against others – 'do not grumble against one another',⁵ nor for uttering careless and profane oaths – 'do not swear'.⁶ It should rather be used to further our communion with God – whatever our chequered human experiences. One commentator⁷ expressed it beautifully, 'Our whole life should be so angled towards God that whatever strikes upon us, whether sorrow or joy, should be deflected upwards at once into His presence'. Times when we are suffering trouble or distress should drive us to prayer, and times when we are joyful in spirit should find their outlet in singing songs of praise.

Helen Williams captured the thought well ...

In every joy that crowns my days, In every pain I bear, My heart shall find delight in praise, Or seek relief in prayer.⁸

Well, no problems in understanding that. In practising it, maybe, but not in understanding it. Ah, but then comes 'is anyone ... Let him' number three!

'Is anyone among you sick', James says – the word rendered 'sick' being translated 'weak' fifteen times out of the nineteen occasions it occurs in the letters of the New Testament ... seemingly indicating here that his illness has left the sick person weak and frail – an idea supported (i) by the fact that he needs to summon the elders to visit him, rather than go and see them, (ii) by the way in which they are said to 'pray over' him – an expression we find nowhere else in the New Testament, (iii) by the (different) word used in verse 15 (meaning 'without strength, 'feeble', 'exhausted'⁹) and (iv) by the outcome envisaged, that, in response to the elders' prayers, the Lord will 'raise him up'.

'Is anyone among you sick (frail and weak, that is)', James says, 'let him call for the elders of the church' and so on. I'll come back to that 'and so on' a little later.

'And if he has committed sins', James adds in verse 15, 'he will be forgiven' ... 'they will be forgiven him', that is. The clear implication being that there were cases – and clearly not a few – where the strength-sapping illness was the direct result of some personal sin or sins. Now we hardly need to be told that this is by no means always – or even usually – true in the case of sickness.

Indeed, we have only to recall the case of Job – which includes of course his horrendous illness¹⁰ – to which James has referred only four verses earlier (in verse 11). For as anybody who has read the book which carries Job's name knows well, in spite of the view expressed *ad nauseam* by his supposed 'friends', the explanation for Job's many sufferings lay elsewhere than in grave personal sins on his part.

And yet, there are times – and it is these which James has in mind – when sickness does come as an expression and manifestation of God's chastisement and disciple on a believer on account of that believer's sin or sins. And one well-known passage which makes just such a connection comes towards the close of the section of 1 Corinthians 11 which we have sought to obey in the earlier part of this very meeting. I refer, of course, to verses 29 and 30, 'anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body (without, that is, recognising the bread and the wine as symbols both of the Lord's own body and blood, and of the unity of the church) eats and drinks *judgment* upon himself. That is why', Paul adds, 'many of you are sick ('weak' – the word here in James 5) and infirm, and a number have fallen asleep (have died, that is)'. 'When we are judged', the apostle further explains in verse 32, 'we are chastened by the Lord'.¹¹

It is clear then, from both Paul and James, that there *are* cases when sickness – and even physical death – can represent God's chastisement upon a believer as a result of that believer's personal sins. But, as I said, this is far from being the usual case – in which sickness is simply part and parcel of our lot as living in a fallen world. And I note that, whereas in John 5, our Lord made it clear that the man at the pool of Bethesda was sick as a consequence of some sin in his life – hence His (our Lord's) words to him following his healing, 'Sin no more, that nothing worse happen to you'¹² ... that, whereas this was the case with the man in John <u>5</u>, in John <u>9</u> our Lord made it equally clear that neither the 'man blind from birth' nor his parents had committed any sin to bring his affliction upon him.¹³

But in our passage, James does envisage that the man who has called for the elders may well have committed sins which gave rise to his illness. In which case, James says, the man needs – and he receives – not only the Lord's healing touch but the Lord's forgiveness¹⁴ ... the man's confession of his sins and his repentance being assumed.

As I understand verse 16, James then continues – and I paraphrase – 'For that reason ('therefore'), any brother who is taken ill and whose conscience tells him that his sickness is the result of God's chastening hand upon him ... in all likelihood, in the context here, on account of sins committed against another believer ... that such a brother should confess those sins ... in all likelihood, I say again, to the believer who has been sinned against ... to the end that the brother sinned against will then join the sick brother in prayer for his healing – which prayer God will then hear, and the sick brother be cured – 'that you may be healed'.

If I have it right, here in verse 16 James has in mind some sickness which has not yet reached the serious – and extremely debilitating – stage which he envisaged in verses 14 and 15, where the man is housebound and bedridden, in such a poor condition that he needed to summon the elders to come to him. Prevent, James would be saying, by confession and prayer the further progress of your illness before it reaches that critical stage.¹⁵

James then concludes what we know as verse 16 with an assertion about the power and the effectiveness of prayer (in the context, I suspect, the power and effectiveness of intercession in bringing healing and forgiveness) – but always, James makes clear, on the condition that the person praying is a righteous person, one living an upright and consistent Christian life, one who doesn't cherish sin in his heart¹⁶ ... and who therefore has a clear sky over his head as far as God in concerned.

And it is at this point (verse 17) that James suddenly introduces Elijah into his sermon.

And I suggest that, if we are to understand what James is saying throughout our passage, it is important that we understand why it is that James cites Elijah's example as he does. For, personally, I don't think it is enough to say that Elijah was the kind of righteous man whom James has just mentioned ... that, ordinary man as Elijah was, his prayers achieved the most remarkable and extraordinary results ... and that he therefore serves as a great encouragement for us in our prayer lives.¹⁷ Please don't misunderstand me, I believe all of that to be true. But I am convinced there is more to it.

For what, I might ask, by way of example only, about (say) the prayers of Joshua¹⁸ or Isaiah¹⁹ – both of whose cries to the Lord (for entirely different reasons) moved God to interfere with the rays of the sun? Were the effects of such prayers not more spectacular than were the effects of Elijah's?

I suggest that James selected Elijah as his 'prayer model' because of the relevance of Elijah's situation to the subject with which James is dealing ... namely, with God's chastening of His people on account of their sins, and with His (God's) withdrawal of His chastening hand once His discipline has had its desired affects.

That is, I believe that James chose Elijah for the simple reason that the prayers of Elijah played a key role at a time, some 900 years before James wrote, when God acted in the most dramatic way to discipline His sinning people.

Let me remind you that the drought for which Elijah prayed so 'fervently' came because of – and only because of – the sin and waywardness of God's people at the time.

Although the relevant Old Testament narrative in 1 Kings 17 doesn't say so, James knew – and assures us – that Elijah had previously prayed that God would do exactly as he (Elijah) notified King Ahab ... when Elijah delivered his long-range weather forecast to the effect that there would be neither rain nor dew for several years.²⁰

And I have no doubt that James knew that Elijah had prayed ... not only fervently ... but biblically – that Elijah had prayed in line with the known and revealed will of God. For had not God forewarned His people that, if they (and I quote) 'turned aside' ('wandered') from Him and His truth,²¹ He – the Lord – would 'shut up heaven that it would give no rain and the earth that it would not yield her fruit'?²²

Had not the Lord made it abundantly clear that the covenant curse to the effect that He (the Lord) would withhold the rain from their land (which Elijah almost certainly had in mind when he prayed) – had the Lord not made it clear that this curse would be His chastisement on His people if they 'turned aside' ('wandered') from His truth – from 'the words' which He had commanded them?²³

And then, as James noted, Elijah prayed again' – and this time his prayer brought blessing and healing to the land,²⁴ when the heaven gave its rain and the earth yielded its fruit. But when did this happen, pray? Not until the people who had earlier 'turned aside' from God and His truth had first repented and been restored to Him!

Now look at the closing verses of James 5. Do you not see the connection? That James envisages a believer who has begun to 'wander' from God's truth²⁵ – using the very same word as does the Greek Old Testament of the sin of Israel which exposed them to God's chastening hand.²⁶ And I note that James uses also the very same word twice (translated 'bring back') as does the Greek Old Testament when speaking of Israel's repentance and return from their 'wandering'²⁷ – albeit a 'conversion' which proved to be short-lived.

That is, in his closing words, James wants his readers to 'know' (to realise) that, if by their caring and careful action (backed, of course, by their Elijah-like²⁸ prayer) ... if they actively pursue the 'wanderer' – who, unlike the sick man of verse 14, is not seeking any support or prayer from the elders of the church ... if they pursue and succeed in 'bringing back' one of God's people ('anyone among you', as James describes him – using the very same expression as he had in verses 13 and 14) ... if they succeed in 'bringing back' one of God's people who (as Israel in Elijah's day) had 'wandered' and who had sinned, then they would 'save', not the man's body by way of healing some sickness which might befall him under God's chastening hand ... as was the case with the believing prayer of the elders for the sinful sick man of verse 15 but they would 'save' his 'soul' from that which, according to 1 Corinthians 11 verse 30, is the ultimate and extreme form of God's chastisement and discipline ... from death itself ... from physical death, that is ... and they would secure his forgiveness – which, in accordance with its use in the Old Testament, is how I understand the expression 'covering' sins here (even if,

James says, there is a multitude of them) – and again, as in verse 15, assuming the man's confession and repentance.

And so, as I said at the outset, I see our passage, not as a set of disconnected parts, but as one whole – held together by two threads – the one being prayer, and the other being God's chastisement on the believer who sins and who wanders away from God and His truth.

But earlier, when noting that the sick, frail man of verse 14 was exhorted to 'call for the elders of the church', I promised to come back to that verse later. Well, here we go – what are we to understand by the anointing with oil?²⁹

Frankly, I don't know for sure. As I see it, there are three main possible interpretations of what James says.

First, that the oil is to be understood as having medical properties. And there can be no doubt that, in biblical times, oil (particularly olive oil) was both (i) used widely and (ii) esteemed highly as a remedy for many ailments. This is easily proved by reference, not only to the standard textbooks of both Greek and Roman medical authorities,³⁰ and to Jewish literature,³¹ but to the text of scripture itself – in both the Old and the New Testaments.³² That is, that the elders were using a familiar natural means of healing in dependence on God ... praying that he would use the therapeutic aid to restore the man to his former health and strength.³³

While very much agreeing that the Christian should battle against illness with a combination of medication and prayer, I do have a real problem with this interpretation in that nobody in the ancient world was so naïve as to believe that oil (of any kind) was a panacea for every illness, nor that its application was always the most appropriate treatment. Whereas James in no way restricts the procedure of verse 14 to only some kinds of sickness – 'is anyone among you sick' are his words.

The second main interpretation is that the anointing functioned, as sometimes in the Old Testament,³⁴ to mark out somebody as set apart as the object of God's blessing ... that it was employed as a symbol of God's favour – as it may well have been by the apostles when they healed 'many who were sick' miraculously.³⁵ But I note that here 'the prayer of faith' takes the place of the miracles wrought by the apostles in Mark 6, where 'they' are credited with both the anointing and the healing.

Third, that to anoint (a very general word here, covering in some contexts, even the ideas of smearing or daubing)³⁶ ... to anoint one's body was the normal practice for a healthy, happy person – where the oil was applied as something refreshing and beneficial – and which would protect the skin from blistering under the sun's burning rays. If somebody was unwell or in mourning – and therefore took no interest in their appearance – they would not bother to anoint themselves.^{37 38}

It is possible therefore that, by anointing the incapacitated man with oil, the elders were expressing their faith that he would shortly be 'up and about' again and able to get on with normal life ... which explanation would, of course, tally well with James's description of their prayer as a 'prayer of faith' and with his (James) attributing the man's healing to that prayer alone – making no mention of any healing properties in the oil.

But, as I said, I do not know for sure.

What I do know is that, according to the Bethesda Two-Monthly sheet, the heading for this morning's study is given as 'Prayer'. Let me finish therefore with two non-biblical quotations – with two quotations which I associate with the words of verse 16; namely, with James' assertion that 'the prayer of a righteous man is very powerful in its effects – quotations which came from two men whose lives ran more or less concurrently through most of the nineteenth century.

The first, from Alfred Tennyson – among the last words which the Poet Laureate put into the mouth of mortally wounded King Arthur, 'More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of'.³⁹

And the second from Martin Tupper ... I began with a quotation from Martin Luther and I close with a quotation from another Martin ... namely that 'Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscles of omnipotence'.⁴⁰ What a thought!

Footnotes

¹ In his Preface to the early editions (September 1522 to 1530) of his translation of the New Testament, Luther wrote, 'Saint John's gospel and St. Paul's epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's first epistle ... show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salutary for you to know ... St. James's epistle is really *an epistle of straw* compared to them, for it lacks this evangelical character'.

See ... <u>http://www.jesuswordsonly.com/Recommended-Reading/luther-and-canon.html.</u> And ... <u>http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/james/Background/originaltexts.htm#luther</u>

² 'Patience' in verses 7 (twice), 8 and 10; 'waiting' in verse 7; and 'enduring' in verse 11 (twice).

 3 In verses 13, 14-15, 16 and 17-18 respectively.

⁴ James 1. 26; 3. 5-6, 8.

⁵ James 5. 9.

⁶ James 5. 12.

⁷ Alec Motyer.

⁸ Helen Maria Williams (1762-1827) – her father was Welsh.

⁹ Grimm-Thayer's Lexicon, W E Vine's 'Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words', and Rotherham's translation.

¹⁰ Job 2. 7-8.

¹¹ 1 Cor. 11. 32.

¹² John 5. 14.

¹³ John 9. 1-3.

¹⁴ The elders were to be summoned for a twofold purpose : (1) that they might pray over the sick person and (2) that they might anoint him with oil in the Name of the Lord. The result anticipated is also twofold : (1) the prayer of faith shall save (heal, that is) the sick, and (2) 'if he have committed sins he will be forgiven'

¹⁵ The only alternative explanation I can suggest for the 'Therefore' of verse 16 is that James is now saying that, if believing prayer (that of the elders) proves effective for healing, even if a sickness if the result of personal sins, then the same approach of confessing such sins (this time to another believer – in all likelihood the one sinned against) will prove effective also.

^{16°} Psa. 66. 18; cf. Proverbs 15. 29. See G S Shogren, 'James 5. 14-16a', Evangelical Quarterly, 61:2, 1989, 99-108.

¹⁷ See K Warrington, 'Elijah', Evangelical Quarterly, 66:3, 1994, 217-227.

¹⁸ Joshua 10. 12-14, noting especially the words 'spoke to the Lord', v. 12, and 'the Lord hearkened to the voice of a man', v. 14.

¹⁹ 2 Chron. 20. 11 ... 'Isaiah the prophet cried out to the Lord, and He brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down on the sundial of Ahaz'.

²⁰ James 5. 17; 1 Kings 17. 1.

²¹ Deut. 11. 28 – 'turn aside out of the way which I command you this day'.

²² Deut. 11. 16-17.

²³ Deut. 28. 14, 23.

²⁴ 2 Chron. 7. 13-14.

²⁵ James 5. 19-20.

²⁶ Deut 11. 16-17; 18; 28. 14-15.

²⁷ 1 Kings 18. 37.

²⁸ 1 Kings 18. 37.

²⁹ The aorist participle does not imply that the anointing is to precede the prayer; cf. Burton, Moods and Tenses, §§ 139-141; Blass-Debrunner, § 339 ; Moulton, Prolegomena, pp. 130-132.

³⁰ 'If there be pains in the head, it is proper to apply oil ... if the tongue is dry ... it is to be anointed with a mixture of oil and honey'. *Aulus Cornelius Celsus (25 BC to 57 AD), a Roman physician and medical historian, in chapter 10 in his book, 'Of Medicine'.*

The so-called father of modern medicine, *Hippocrates*, recommended olive oil to treat skin abrasions. A second-century physician, *Galen*, described oil as "the best of all remedies for paralysis". *Pliny* devoted no less than 17 paragraphs (Book 23, paragraphs 34-50) in his Natural History to the

medicinal properties of oil.

³¹ Concerning Herod the Great ... 'the physicians thought proper to bathe his whole body in warm oil, by letting it down into a large vessel full of oil'. *Flavius Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Book 1, Chapter 33, Paragraph 5.*

'One who has pains in his loins must not rub them with wine or vinegar, but may anoint them with oil'. *The Mishna, Shabbath, Chapter 14, Paragraph 4.*

'Anointing on the Sabbath is permitted. If his head ache, or if a scall (?) comes upon it, he anoints it with oil'. *The Jerusalem* Talmud, *Maasar Sheni 5. 3. 3.*

'Why need we seek for more in the way of ointment than the juice pressed out of the fruit of the olive? For that softens the limbs, and relieves the labour of the body, and produces a good condition of the flesh; and if anything has got relaxed or flabby, it binds it again, and makes it firm and solid, and it fills us with vigour and strength of muscle'. *Philo, Dreams, Book 2, Paragraph 58.*

³² Isa 1. 6; Luke 10. 34. ³³ The disciples in Mark 6 verse 13 were not 'men trusting in charms ... but rather those who used simple natural means of healing in dependence on God', E H Plumptre, 'The Cambridge Bible on the Epistle of James', page 103.

³⁴ See the use of the word of religious and symbolical anointings in Gen. 31. 13; Exod. 40. 13; Numb. 3. 3.

³⁵ Mark 6. 13.

³⁶ See the use of the word in the Greek Old Testament translation of Ezekiel 13 verse 10: 'And when one builds up a wall, behold, they daub it with untempered mortar'.

See Deut. 28. 40; Micah 6. 15, and then 2 Sam. 12. 20; 14. 2; Daniel 10. 2-3; and Matt. 6. 17. In a papyrus letter of the 2nd century, a husband (Serenus) wrote to his wife, who had been away from home for a month and whose return he eagerly desired: 'I assure you that ever since you left me I have been in mourning, weeping by night and lamenting by day' ... and then as a practical proof/expression of his grief, he added ... 'since ... July 12th I neither bathed nor anointed myself until August 12th. Oxyrhynchus Papyri, iii, No. 528, quoted by George Milligan, 'Here and There Among the Papyri', pages 90-91.) The actual Greek text (as in footnote 31) can be seen at http://www.archive.org/stream/oxyrhynchuspapyr03gren#page/264/mode/2up.

THE OXYRHYNCHUS PAPYRI

Σ'ερηνος Είσιδώρα [τη ἀδελφη καὶ κυρία πλαῖστ[α χαίρειν. πρὸ μὲν ποντὸς εὕχομ[αί σε ὑγιαίνει⟨ν⟩ καὶ καθ' ἐκάστης [ἡμέρα]ς κα[ὶ 5 ὀψ⟨ί⟩ας τὸ προσκύνημά σου πυῶ

παρὰ τῆ σε φιλούση Θοήρι. γινόσκειν σε θέλω ἀφ' ὡs ἐ{κ}ξῆλθεs ἀπ' ἐμοῦ πένθοs ἡγούμην νυκτὸs κλέων ἡμέραs δὲ πενθῷ(ν). ιβ Φαῶφι ἀφ' ὅτε

10 ἐλουσάμην μετ' ἐσοῦ οὐκ ἐλουσάμην οὐκ ἤλιμ⟨μ⟩ε μέχρει ιβ 'Αθύρ, καὶ ἔπεμσάς μυ ἐπιστολὰς δυναμένου λίθον σαλεῦσε, οὕτως ὑ λόγυ σου καικίνηκάν με. αὐτῆ{ν} τῆ ὅρα ἀντέγρα-

15 ψά συ καὶ ἔδωκα τῆ ιβ μετὰ τῶν
σῶν ἐπιστολῶν ἐσ {σ} φραγιζμένα.
χωρεὶς δὲ τῶν σῶν λόγων κὲ γραμ⟨μ⟩άτων ὁ Κόλοβος δὲ πόρνην με πεπύηκεν, ἔλεγε δὲ ὅτι ἔπεμσέ μυ φάσειν
20 ἡ γυνή σου ὅτι αὐτὸς πέπρακεν τὸ ἁλυ-

σίδιον καὶ αὐτὸς κατέστακέ με ε[ỉ]ς τὸ πλῦν τούτους τοὺς λόγους λέγεις ἥνα μηκέτι [[φ]]πιστευθῶ μου τὴν ἐνβολ[ήν. ἐδοῦ ποσά{ρ}κεις ἔπεμσα ἐπὶ σέ. ἔρχῃ [εἴτε 25 οἰκ ἕρχῃ δήλοσόν μυ. [

On the verso

άπόδος Είσιδόρα π(αρά) Σερήνου.

2. l. πλε	îστ[a. 5. l.	ποιῶ.	6. 1. yw	ώσκειν. 8.	 κλαίων. 	II.
 <i>ň</i>λειμ(μ)αι . 	ἕπεμψαs; cf. ll.	19 and 24.		12. l. µor δι	vaµévas.	13.
l. σαλεύσαι	. οί λόγοι σου κεκίν	<i>ука</i> ν. I4.	l. ώρα.	15. l. σοι.	17. 1. кай.	18.
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ποσάκις. 2	5. 1. δήλωσόν μοι.	26. l. 'Io	ιδώρα.			

'Serenus to his beloved sister Isidora, many greetings. Before all else I pray for your health, and every day and evening I perform the act of veneration on your behalf to Thöeris who loves you. I assure you that ever since you left me I have been in mourning,

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³⁹ 'More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of ... what are men better than sheep or goats ... if, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer both for themselves and those who call them friend?' ... Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892), '*Morte D'Arthur'* – among the last words of King Arthur spoken to Sir Bedivere. See ... http://library.sc.edu/spcoll/britlit/tenn/morte.html

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⁴⁰ 'Prayer is a creature's strength, his very breath and being ... Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscles of omnipotence' ... Martin Farquhar Tupper (1810-1889), '*Proverbial philosophy: a book of thoughts and arguments*', 1848 edition, page 62.