

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*A PLAY ON WORDS IN THE LOGIA HITHERTO
UNNOTICED.*

A NOTE ON ST. MATT. xxiii. 29-31=ST. LUKE xi. 47-48.

So far as the writer can learn, it has never been noticed that the point of one of the sayings of our Lord lies in a play upon the similar sound of two words. This is an oratorical expedient which is by no means rarely used in Hebrew prophecy, which easily escapes the notice of one who is not at home in the language of the orator, and which can scarcely ever, even if noticed, be retained in a translation into another language. It is, therefore, not surprising that the two evangelists St. Matthew and St. Luke have not retained it in this instance, and that it was not to be recognised in the Greek Logia upon which our First and Third Gospels depend.

The saying in question occurs in the discourse against the Pharisees (St. Matt. xxiii. 29-31=St. Luke xi. 47-48). Woe is denounced against the hearers because they build the sepulchres of the prophets. In neither Gospel is the ground of the reproach clearly given. As we read and apply the passage we understand that the fault denounced lies in the paying outward formal reverence to the prophets of old while the spirit of their teaching is neglected. This, no doubt, was the inward intention of our Lord as He spoke, but in neither of the Gospels is it plainly expressed. Rather from the study of the two parallel passages, and more especially from St. Luke, we receive the impression that the act of building in itself, not the building of the sepulchres (*ἀντῶν τὰ μνημεῖα* does not occur in the true text of St. Luke xi. 48) is denounced as testifying against the builders; as St. Luke renders the saying : *Woe unto you ! for ye build the tombs of the prophets and your fathers killed them. So*

that ye are witnesses and consent unto the works of your fathers: for they killed them and ye build. Here it is quite obvious that in "ye build" lies the whole sting of the saying, that it is "the building" which makes them witnesses; yet it is by no means clear how this is so. The common recondite interpretation, referred to later, which no doubt lies behind St. Luke's rendering, cannot be that of the original saying. In a public rebuke of this kind the speaker's point, if it is to have effect, must be clear and incisive.

When, however, we turn the last words of the saying (in St. Luke's form) into Aramaic—the language in which it was spoken by our Lord—we find that *οικοδομείτε* is represented by the words אַתְּנוֹן בְּנִין אַתְּנוֹן, which so written may be indifferently rendered in English "building (are) ye" or "sons (are) ye,"¹ and even in the spoken language might be intentionally so pronounced as to render the meaning ambiguous.² If now we turn to St. Matthew we notice that those whom our Lord is denouncing are said to testify against themselves, "that they are the sons of those who slew the prophets." We at once conclude that there is a play here upon the likeness in sound of the two phrases "sons (are) ye" and "building ye."

I therefore suggest that herein lies the whole point of this "woe." Our Lord with bitter sarcasm deduces from the sound of the word, which described the action of his hearers

¹ The two representatives of the old Syriac version afford an interesting example of this ambiguity in their rendering of St. Luke xi. 48. Syr.^{Sta.} reads אַתְּנוֹן בְּנִין אַתְּנוֹן, while Syr.^{Cur.} transforms this into אַתְּנוֹן וְאִתְּנוֹן קְטוּלָא [and ye the sons (are) ye of those murderers].

² "Building are ye" would be pronounced *attun bānain attun* (the *a* in *banain* would have much the same sound as *a* in "all"). For the exact Galilaean pronunciation of בְּנִין "sons" we are left to conjecture. However, from the word *βοαρπηγές* we may suppose with Dalman (*Die Worte Jesu*, p. 39) that something of an *o* sound was heard in the first vowel; "their sons" would be pronounced *b'néhon*, or perhaps *b'néon* in Galilee, so that the word for "building" might easily be made to suggest "sons" or "their sons."

(their building), the reproach that they were "sons," sons of the murderers, where the word "son" carried with it all that connotation of community of character and of guilt which it would naturally suggest to the Hebrew mind.

I would, therefore, reconstruct the body of the original saying somewhat as follows:—

"Well do ye bear witness against yourselves that ye are the sons of those who killed the prophets, for they killed them and ye build [בְּנִין אֲתֵינִי], with a play upon 'אֲנִי בְנֵי (בְּנֵיהֶן) אֲנִי—and ye sons (*vel* their sons) ye.'" By an intentionally indistinct pronunciation of the last words the point would be driven home in what, to a Hebrew, would have been a most forcible and telling way.

Assuming the truth of this simple explanation of the original saying, it is interesting to note the changes which it undergoes under the hands of the two evangelists.

Taking, in the first place, the text of St. Luke, we perceive that here also *οἰκοδομεῖτε* is the crucial word. One is tempted to suppose that St. Luke had some knowledge of the Aramaic original of the Greek logion which lay before him; at all events after some reflection we find that he has seized the deeper intention of the saying and has recast its phraseology so as to express the essential thought in a form more suitable to an Hellenic mind. "Ye witness to yourselves that ye are sons of them that slew the prophets" becomes "ye are witnesses and consent unto the works of your fathers," i.e. the thought of the original is simply expressed in other words; *οἰκοδομεῖτε* is given something of the significance which it often bears in the Pauline writings, "ye build up, confirm, what they have done"; the erection of the sepulchre is not a sign of reverence for the prophets, but a monument to their murder and a witness to a character, the natural offspring of the murderers, which spiritually confirms and ratifies the deeds of the fathers.

The builders, in fact, are the *μάρτυρες* of the murder (cf. Acts vii. 58). Though the thought is recondite, we must confess that the problem of rendering the point of the saying in Greek has been solved by St. Luke very skilfully; he has turned what was in Aramaic a play upon sound into a play upon the sense (usual and metaphorical) of the Greek word *οικοδομεῖτε*.

The treatment of the saying in St. Matthew is of an entirely different character. The deeper significance of the saying is not seized and the attention of the evangelist is concentrated upon its central clause—"ye witness to yourselves that ye are sons of them that slew the prophets." The rest of the saying is remodelled so as to explain wherein this witness consists. Those whom our Lord addresses are made to speak of those who killed the prophets as their fathers—"if we had lived in the days of our fathers, etc."—thus testifying out of their own mouths that they are the children of the murderers. The building of the sepulchres, the exciting cause of our Lord's denunciation, falls into the background and stands out of vital connexion with the development of the thought of the saying; the stress is laid upon words which the builders use, these it is that call down our Lord's sarcastic comment as He seizes upon the word "fathers." It is strange that Harnack,¹ while noticing that St. Matthew has amplified the saying, should nevertheless have adopted this version, with its somewhat superficial repartee, as the original version. Surely if so obvious an explanation of the clause concerning the witness had lain before St. Luke he would not have given us so difficult a text of the saying as that which we find in his Gospel.

However, although our reconstruction of the original saying is different from that of Harnack, it will be noticed that the general results of his criticism of the characteristics

¹ *Sayings of Jesus*, pp. 97 ff., 138 f.

of the two editors of the Logia hold good also in this instance. Here, also, the first evangelist, while bent upon superficial accuracy in reproducing the text, does not shrink from rather serious interpolation and modification of the sense ; here also St. Luke, while prone to verbal alteration and paraphrase, gives on the whole an excellent representation of the actual meaning of our Lord's words. Harnack has failed to discover the suggested original of this particular saying simply because he does not allow the fact that our Lord spoke in Aramaic to influence his reconstruction of the Greek original used by the evangelists. Fortunately the cases in which this omission would seriously affect the value of his work must be very few in number.

J. R. WILKINSON.