Traces of Hebrew and Aramaic in the Gothic Translation St. Matthew

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In the 4th century the Gothic Bishop Wulfila translated the Bible into Gothic. Several hundred leaves of that translation have remained extant, among them a portion of St. Matthew. Those leaves are part of the Codex Argenteus, which is preserved at the Library of Uppsala University.[1]

Very little is known about Wulfila and his work and there is no evidence that he knew Hebrew or Aramaic. In this article I examine traces of Hebrew and Aramaic in his translation of St. Matthew.

In Christian writings there are testimonies for the existence of a Hebrew text of St. Matthew. Writing on Papias, a hearer of John the Apostle and the bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia Asia Minor in the beginning of the 2th century, Eusebius related:

> This account, then, is the result of Papias's enquiries about Mark. Concerning Matthew he has made the following statement: "Matthew, at any rate, used the Hebrew language in his exposition of the Gospel, and each one translated it as best he could." (Ecclesiastic History III 39: 16)

On Irenius (born c. 120/140, died c. 200/203) Eusebius wrote:

> Now Irenaeus was one of these, so let us quote his words, and in the first place those which refer to the sacred Gospels as follows: "Now Matthew published among the Hebrews a written gospel also in their tongue, while Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome and founding the church." (Book V, 8: 2)

Eusebius quoted Origen (born c. 185, died c. 254):

> As having learnt by tradition concerning the four Gospels, which alone are unquestionable in the Church of God under heaven, that first was written according to Matthew, who was once a tax collector but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ, who published it for those who from Judaism came to believe, composed as it was in the Hebrew language." (Book vi, 25: 4)

Eusebius himself also believed that St. Matthew was written in Hebrew. He wrote:

> Matthew had first preached to Hebrews, and when he was on the point of going to others he transmitted in writing in his native language the Gospel according to himself, and thus supplied by writing the lack of his own presence to those from whom he was sent, and Mark and Luke had already published the Gospels according to them... (Book iii, 24: 6)

According to St. Jerome (Letter 20: 4) Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew:

> Finally, Matthew, who wrote his Gospel in the Hebrew tongue, has expressed it thus: osianna barrama, that is hosanna in the highest. (Trans. Charles C. Mierow)

According to David Flusser (1987: 11) it can be safely assume that both Jesus and Paul spoke Hebrew. Flusser wrote:

> There are saying of Jesus which can be rendered both into Hebrew and Aramaic; but there are some which can only be rendered into Hebrew, and none of them can be render only into Aramaic. One can thus demonstrate the Hebrew origins of the Gospels by retranslating them into Hebrew. (p.11)

From my own experience with working with the Gothic text of St. Matthew, I would say that I can follow it almost word for word with the 19th century Delitzsch's Hebrew translation, which was done from Greek.

In this paper I deal with Gothic words that were possibly loaned either from Hebrew or Aramaic or are cognates with words from these languages, and expression that may have originated from Hebrew.

St. Matthew V, 19: *þiudangardjai himine*

Literally: 'the yard (court) of the kingdom of heaven.'

King James Version: ...in the kingdom of heaven:

Greek: *τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν* 'the kingdom of heaven'

Latin: *in regno caelorum* 'the kingdom of heaven'

A Hebrew reconstruction: *חצר מלכות השמים** 'the yard (court) of the kingdom of heaven.'

In the Hebrew Bible the term 'yard' appears sometimes in association with the temple or a king:
Psalms 135: 2 Ye that stand in the house of the LORD, in the **courts** of the house of our God. (emphasis added)
Esther 6: 4 And the king said, Who is in the **court**?

Feist (1939 s.v. þiudan-gardjai) interpreted 'Königshaus.'

St. Matthew V: 22 *raka*

Literally: empty, e.g. a senseless, empty headed man.

King James and whosoever shall say to his brother, **Raca**,

Greek: *ῥακά* 'raca'

Latin: *racha* 'raca'

Hebrew: *ריקא, ריקה*. In Aramaic: *ריק* 'raca'

The etymon of the word is Hebrew or Aramaic. Its meaning was known to the author of the Didascalia Apostolorum, apparently written in the 3rd century:

> For what hope at all is there for him who speaks evil of the bishop, or the deacon? For if one call a layman fool, or raca, he is liable to the assembly, as one of those who rise up against Christ: because that he calls 'empty' his brother in whom Christ dwells, who is not empty but fulfilled... (Chapter IX [p.93])

St. Matthew V 22: *gaiainnan* funins

Literally: 'hell fire'

King James Version: ...shall be in danger of hell fire.

Greek: *γέεννα* 'hell'

Latin: *gehennae* ignis 'hell fire'

Hebrew: גיהנום 'hell'

St. Matthew V 35: *airþa*

Literally: 'earth'

King James Version: 35 Nor by the earth

Greek: μήτε ἐν τῇ *γῇ* 'Nor by the earth'

Latin: neque per *terram* 'Nor by the earth'

Hebrew: ארץ 'earth'

Feist (1939, s.v. airþa) suggests the Aramaic *erkir* as a cognate. The Hebrew ארץ is cognate with the Aramaic word.

St. Matthew V 35: *unte fotubaurd ist fotwe*

Literally: 'foot-board for the foot'

King James Version: 35 ... for it is his footstool

Greek: *ὑποπόδιόν* 'footstool'

Latin: *scabillum est pedum eius* 'for it is his footstool'

In Hebrew: הדם רגליו. For example: Isaiah - Chapter 66: 1 Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.

St. Matthew V: 35 baurgs

Literally: 'burg'

King James Version: 35 ...for it is the city ...

Greek: *πόλις* 'burg'

Latin: *civitas* 'burg'
Hebrew: בירה 'burg'

Accoring to Feist (1939, s.v. baurgs) the Gothic word is cognate with the Syriac *burga* and the Aramaic *burgin, burgon*. Lehmann (1986: 591) mentioned the Hebrew *birah* (בירה) in the list of Afro-Asiatic sources or cognates. In Even-Shoshan Dictionary (1968) the Acadian word *biritu* is mentioned as cognate.

St. Matthew V 41: *rasta*
Literally: 'mile'
King James Version: 35 ...to go a mile
Greek: *μίλιον* 'mile'
Latin: *mille* 'mile'

In the Talmud there appears a unit of distance called *ris* (ריס). It is around 150 meter. If this word is cognate with the Gothic *rasta*, then we have here two different units of distance, a mile and a ris.

St. Matthew VI 11: *hlaif* unsarana þana *sinteinan* gif uns himma daga

Literally: 'daily bread'

King James Version: Give us this day our daily bread.

Greek: τὸν *ἄρτον* ἡμῶν τὸν *ἐπιούσιον1* δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον

Latin: panem nostrum supersubstantialem da nobis hodie

Hebrew: Junius (1665: 394) suggested *לחם התמיד* 'continual bread' (see figure 1).

(Numbers - Chapter 4: 7 And upon the table of shewbread they shall spread a cloth of blue, and put thereon the dishes, and the spoons, and the bowls, and covers to cover withal: and the continual bread shall be thereon.)

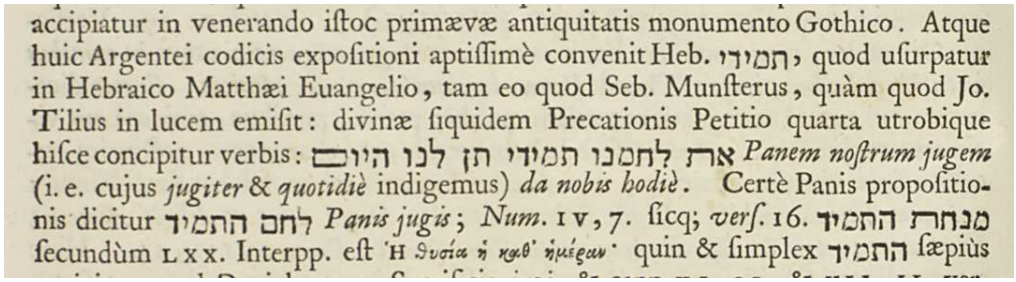
accipiatur in venerando iſtoc primævæ antiquitatis monumento Gothico. Atque huic Argentei codicis expoſitioni aptiſſimè convenit Heb. תמידי, quod uſurpatur in Hebraico Matthæi Euangelio, tam eo quod Seb. Munſterus, quàm quod Jo. Tilius in lucem emiſit: divinæ ſiquidem Precationis Petitio quarta utrobique hiſce concipitur verbis: את לחמנו תמידי תן לנו היום *Panem noſtrum jugem* (i. e. cujus *jugiter* & *quotidiè* indigemus) *da nobis hodiè*. Certè Panis propoſitionis dicitur לחם התמיד *Panis jugis*; *Num.* IV, 7. ſicq; *verſ.* 16. מנחת התמיד ſecundùm LXX. Interpp. eſt Ἡ θυσία ἡ καθ' ἡμέραν· quin & ſimplex התמיד ſæpiùs

Figure 1. Junius' intepretation

St. Matthew VI 24: *mammona**

In the Gothic text: ni maguþ gþa skalkinon jah mammonin 'not you may god serve and mammon'

Literally: 'mammon'

King James Version: Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Greek: *μαμωνᾶς* 'mammon'

Latin: non potestis Deo servire et *mamonae* 'mammon'

Hebrew: *ממון* 'mammon'

St. Matthew VI 30: *leitil galaubjandans*

Literally: of little faith

King James Version: O ye of little faith

Greek: *ὀλιγόπιστοι* 'of little faith'

Latin: *vos minimae fidei* ' of little faith'

Hebrew: *קטני אמונה* 'of little faith'

St. Matthew IX 17: *wein*

literally: 'wine'

King James Version: 17 Neither do men put new wine into old bottles:

Greek: *οἶνον* 'wine'

Latin: *vinum* 'wine'

Hebrew: יין 'wine'

According to Lehmann (1986, s.v. wein), no ultimate source can be determined

St. Matthew XI 17: *qainon*

literally: 'mourn for, lament'

King James Version: ... and ye have not lamented.

Greek: κόπτω, 'lament, wail, mourn'

Latin: et non *planxistis* ' and ye have not lamented'

Hebrew: קונן 'lament'

I suggest that the Hebrew word is the ultimate etymon of the Gothic word.

St. Matthew xxvii 6: *kaurbanaun*

literally: a gift to the temple

King James Version: 6 And the chief priests took the silver pieces,

Greek: *κορβᾶν*, 'treasury, corban'
Latin: argenteis 'silver'
Hebrew: קורבן 'corban'

The Gothic word follows the Greek word, which, in turn is derived from the Hebrew word. The Latin and the King James versions use the term *silver*.

Generally it is assumed that the Gothic translation follows an unknown ancient version of the Bible. In fact, Streiberg (1908) endeavored to reconstruct such a text. From comparing the Gothic text and the Delitzsch's Hebrew translation and also from comparing the Hebrew loan-words in the text of St. Matthew, I suggest that this assumption is incorrect. If there are differences between the Greek and Gothic versions, at least for St. Matthew they are very minor and may have resulted from stylistic preferences or linguistic constrains; no two languages are identical.

Bishop Wulfila must have kept in front of him several translations, possibly also one or several which are presently extinct, and created, as all agree, a very good Gothic translation.

Notes

1 The digital version of facsimile edition of the Codex Argenteus is at: http://app.ub.uu.se/arv/codex/faksimiledition/contents.html

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Tampere

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