

# **The relevance of certain Semiticisms in the Gothic New Testament**

Brendan N. Wolfe

It is worth emphasizing that it is not the generic Greek language which exerts Hellenizing influence on Gothic, but rather the Greek New Testament specifically. This is demonstrated by the consideration of unGreek features of the Greek New Testament, such as Semiticisms. This approach also resolves an anomalous usage of Gothic *jabai*, generally unexplained in grammars and dictionaries, and highlights a departure from the sense of the Greek in one passage.

## **1. Introduction**

### 1.1 Influence

It has long been recognized that a key question for the study of the Gothic language is the degree and nature of the influence of the Greek *Vorlage* on the language of the Gothic Bible. Inasmuch as translation effects are widely observed phenomena, and the concept of “translationese” common to speakers of many languages, it is natural to assume that discernible Greek influence on Biblical Gothic is an artefact of the translation process. It is conceivable however that Gothic was more generally influenced by language contact with Greek, before the Bible was rendered into this heavily Hellenized language. In other words, we might ask how much of the influence of the Greek New Testament on Biblical Gothic is Greek, and how much is New Testament? Is dependency of Biblical Gothic on Greek due to language contact in general (or at least in all formal, written contexts), which would have affected any other texts written in Gothic, or due to the specific exigencies of translating this

particular text?

In the realm of vocabulary, the answer appears clear: Greek borrowings into Gothic are overwhelmingly of a Christian religious nature, while other borrowed words of Mediterranean civilization are usually supplied by Latin (Kortlandt 2001: 21-25). Can it be determined whether this pattern holds true in the other areas of Greek influence? If other texts were available in Gothic, it would be possible to furnish an answer by comparison. As it is, however, the *Skeireins* is too short, and likely also a translation (Schäferdiek 1981), and the Bologna Fragments (cf. Falluomini 2017 for the latest readings) are also largely Biblical. Thus, an alternative technique is required. Since the object is to differentiate the Greek Bible text from the Greek language as a whole, anomalies in the language of the New Testament will be of use. If the Greek influence on Biblical Gothic is that of general language contact, then unGreek peculiarities in the New Testament should not be reflected in Gothic. If, on the other hand, the Gothic Bible derives its Greek character from fidelity to the New Testament itself (evidently the likelier hypothesis), then the anomalies should be preserved at the same rate as other linguistic features.

## 1.2 Semiticisms in Greek

The New Testament in its original Greek language was already subject to language influence; present in the Greek are influences from the Semitic languages of the region of its composition, representing for the Gothacist a still earlier layer of linguistic influence. These “Semiticisms” are instances of the Greek text conforming itself to grammatical or lexical rules of Aramaic or Hebrew. They have entered the text either as the result of mistakes on the part of the authors, for whom Greek was likely a second language, or as signs of how Greek was used in the cultural milieu of the text’s composition. In the latter case, the most important source to mention is the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, which is the

version of choice when the New Testament authors cite the law and the prophets.

Some Semiticisms are easy to identify, while others are more problematic.<sup>1</sup> Much work remains to be done on the Semitic influences on the New Testament: Too many purported Semiticisms are merely unliterary usages in Greek, or even simply features of the Koine. Solid work by New Testament grammarians has not been taken up in all commentaries and treatments. The present study is not the place to improve this situation, however, and dedicated, scientific studies continue to appear (e.g. Hogeterp & Denaux 2018). Rather, this brief note intends to draw attention to three points: 1) aspects of the translation processes responsible for Biblical Gothic; 2) a particular use of Gothic *jabai*; and 3) the excellent work on Biblical Gothic, including Semiticisms, by Antonio Piras, regrettably difficult to find outside of Italy.<sup>2</sup>

In light of these limited objectives, only a few of the most solid cases have been selected to illustrate the Gothic approach to these unGreek idioms. They have been divided into cases of grammatical influence, where the syntax or morphology of a Semitic language appears to be reflected in the Greek, and cases of lexical influence, where a Greek word takes on an additional sense from its Semitic counterpart.

## **2. Grammatical Semiticisms in Gothic**

### **2.1 Degree**

Ancient Hebrew and Aramaic did not have comparative and superlative degrees for adjectives (Gesenius 1910: §133, cf. Piras 2007: §9.3.2-3). Instead, a preposition is added to the noun to which the comparison is made. Although “than” in the English comparative

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, one of the most regularly cited is the proliferation of *καὶ*. While this does indeed mirror Hebrew usage, it is also a not uncommon feature of unliterary languages. Select cases, however, such as John 17:25, where the first *καὶ* means ‘although’, may indeed show the influence of *ו*.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Prof. Piras for providing me with offprints of both works referenced at the end of this article.

phrase “x is more than y” is not a preposition, it fulfils a similar function. Thus, “he is faster than she”, if Semiticized, would read “he is fast than she”. Example (1), Mark 9:43 shows that this construction was adopted unaltered into Gothic (repeated at Mark 9:47).

(1) Mark 9:43a καὶ ἐὰν σκανδαλίζη σε ἡ χεὶρ σου, ἀπόκοψον αὐτήν: καλόν ἐστὶν σε κυλλὸν εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν ζωὴν ἢ τὰς δύο χεῖρας ἔχοντα ἀπελθεῖν εἰς τὴν γέενναν

*jah jabai marzjai þuk handus þeina, afmait þo; goh þus ist hamfamma in libain galeiþan, þau twos handuns habandin galeiþan in gaiainnan*

And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is good for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell

However, as example (2) reveals, the Gothic translator was willing to introduce a Gothic comparative, perhaps due to the lack of a “than” word.

(2) Luke 5:39 [καὶ] οὐδεὶς πῶν παλαιὸν θέλει νέον: λέγει γάρ, ὁ παλαιὸς χρηστός ἐστίν.

*jah ainshun drigkandane fairni, ni suns wili jugg; qīþīþ auk: þata fairnjo batizo ist.*

No man also having drunk old wine straightway desires new: for he says, The old is [Goth. “better”, Gk “good”].

The superlative is expressed in Hebrew sometimes with an adverb of degree and sometimes by making the adjective determinate; thus, only context will distinguish between e.g. “very good” and “best” or “the young one” and “the youngest”. The use of the positive μέγας in Luke 9:48 (example 3) appears to be under the influence of this practice, although being neither determinate nor adverbially modified, the mechanism of influence is unclear. An additional oddity in this verse is that the adjective to which μέγας is contrasted is in the comparative degree in Greek but the superlative in Gothic.

(3) Luke 9:48b ... ὁ γὰρ μικρότερος ἐν πᾶσιν ὑμῖν ὑπάρχων οὗτός ἐστιν μέγας.

*...unte sa minnista wisands in allaim izwis, sa wairþīþ mikils.*

...for he that is [Gk “lesser”, Goth. “least”] among you all, the same shall be great.

## 2.2 Adjectival Genitive

A common Hebrew means of highlighting a particular quality of a noun, which in other languages might be accomplished with an attributive adjective, is to appose the noun in question with the noun of the relevant quality (*eg* “true words” may be written “words of truth”, Gesenius 1910: §131, 2b, cf. Piras 2007: §9.3.1). The relationship between these nouns is formally identical to descriptions of possession and thus finds a parallel in the Greek genitive case. For this reason, the relevant Semiticism is described in New Testament grammars as the adjectival genitive. In examples 4, 5, and 6, where clear adjectival genitives occur in Gothic translation, the Gothic reproduces the Semiticism in the Greek.

- (4) Mark 9:47b ... καλόν σέ ἐστίν μονόφθαλμον εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τήν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἢ δύο ὀφθαλμοὺς ἔχοντα βληθῆναι εἰς τήν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός<sup>3</sup>

... *goh þus ist haihamma galeiþan in þiudangardja gudis, þau twa augona habandin atwairpan in gaiainnan funins*

...for it is better one-eyed to go into the kingdom of God, than having two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna of fire [*ie* “fiery Gehenna”]

- (5) Luke 16:8a καὶ ἐπῆνεσεν ὁ κύριος τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας

*jah hazida sa frauja þana fauragaggjan inwindiþos*

And the lord commended the steward of injustice [*ie* “the unjust steward”]

- (6) Luke 18:6 εἶπεν δὲ ὁ κύριος, ἀκούσατε τί ὁ κριτὴς τῆς ἀδικίας λέγει:

*qah þan frauja: hauseiþ hva staua inwindiþos qiþiþ.*

And the Lord said, Hear what the judge of injustice [*ie* “the unjust judge”] says.

In another apparent case, Luke 16:9 μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας “mammon of unrighteousness”, may equally express “mammon derived from unrighteousness”, in which case it is not an

<sup>3</sup> Only certain manuscripts and versions have τοῦ πυρός, apparently including the Gothic *Vorlage*.

adjectival genitive at all. Either way, it is rendered by *faihuþraihna inwindiþos*, the formulation expected.

### 3. Lexical Semiticism: Gothic *jabai*

- (7) Mark 8:12b ... ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, εἰ δοθήσεται τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ σημεῖον.  
... *amen, qīþa izwis: jabai gibaidau kunja þamma taikne.*  
... Verily I say unto you, if a sign shall be given [*ie* no sign shall be given] unto this generation

The standard sense of Hebrew  $\text{אִם}$  is ‘if, whether’, and it is the main conjunction for conditional clauses. However, an important additional use is in phrases of oath-taking or asseveration, where it introduces the promise or threat, with a sense close to ‘certainly not’. Thus, Deuteronomy 1:34-35 “And the LORD heard your words and was angered, and he swore, ‘Not [literally ‘if’] one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers’”. It has been suggested (Gesenius 1910: §149) that this odd formulation arose from oaths formulated as conditionals, where the apodosis contained a self-imprecation, as in the famous fifth verse of Psalm 137: “if I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill”. These formulaic apodoses were subsequently dropped, leaving only the threatening or promising protasis. The Greek of the Septuagint adopted the usage; the verses from Deuteronomy cited above read *καὶ ἤκουσεν κύριος τὴν φωνὴν τῶν λόγων ὑμῶν καὶ παροξυνθεὶς ὤμοσεν λέγων εἰ ὄψεται τις τῶν ἀνδρῶν τούτων τὴν ἀγαθὴν ταύτην γῆν ἣν ὤμοσα τοῖς πατράσιν αὐτῶν.*

The New Testament formulation is transmitted directly into Gothic, although Gothic dictionaries and grammars have in general not highlighted the usage. Braune/Heidermanns

(2004: s.v. *jabai*), Wright (1954: §351.8), and Lehmann (1986: s.v. *jabai*) all offer ‘if’ as a simple translation; Bennett (1980: 159) ‘if, even if, although’. Fuller treatment in Regen (1974: s.v. *jabai*) addresses various types of conditional with which the word is employed, but does not mention this usage. Friedrichsen (1926:18) cites the verse among “imitations of hellenisms”, providing no gloss or reference to Semitic. A student baffled by the verse would find limited help in Streitberg (1910: 71), who cites the verse, claiming that it is *in rhetorischer Färbung*, and gives *ob ein Zeichen gegeben wird!* ‘if a sign shall be given!’, i.e. *niemals wird es gegeben* ‘it will never be given’ as translations. Once again, no reference is made to the formulation’s origin. It is only in the thorough treatment of Piras (2007: §9.3.8) and the glossary of the relatively obscure grammar of Lambdin (2006: s.v. *jabai*), who had previously authored a grammar of Biblical Hebrew, that mention is made of the underlying Semitic usage.

#### 4. An Alteration: Gender

(8) Mark 12:10b-11 λίθον ὃν ἀπεδοκίμασαν οἱ οἰκοδομοῦντες, οὗτος ἐγενήθη εἰς κεφαλὴν γωνίας: παρὰ κυρίου ἐγένετο αὕτη, καὶ ἔστιν θαυμαστὴ ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς ἡμῶν;

*stains þammei uswaurpun þai timrjans, sah warþ du haubida waihstins:  
fram frauþin warþ sa jah ist sildaleiks in augam unsaraim.*

The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner:  
Of the Lord was this done, and it is marvellous in our eyes?

אָבן מֵאֲסוּי הַבּוֹנִים הָיְתָה לְרֹאשׁ פְּנֵה:  
מֵאֵת יְהוָה הָיְתָה הַזֶּה וְהִיא נִפְלְאָה בְּעֵינֵינוּ:

Example (8) is a direct quotation of Psalm 117/8 in the Septuagint; the Masoretic text is provided for comparison. It is the gender of the underlined words that is at issue. Hebrew

lacks the neuter gender commonly used cross-linguistically to refer to a grammatical subject (“this” refers originally to the entire phrase “the stone... has become the head of the corner”), and makes use of the feminine in its place (Gesenius 1910: §122.4a). Gender is extensively marked in the Hebrew phrase, on the demonstrative and adjective as in Greek, but also on the verb “was done” and the pronoun. That  $\text{אֶבֶן}$  ‘stone’ is also feminine is a mere co-incidence, a fact recognized by the translators of the Septuagint, who use the (masculine)  $\lambda\acute{\iota}\theta\omicron\varsigma$  for ‘stone’, and the (feminine)  $\alpha\tilde{\upsilon}\tau\eta$  for ‘this’. There is no reason internal to Greek for the latter to be feminine rather than neuter (Smyth 1920: §2501a); attraction to the Hebrew seems to be the explanation.

In this case, the Gothic Version does not follow the Greek: The Semitic influence is not perpetuated into Gothic. The Gothic translator, however, did not opt for the neuter expected for a pronoun with a phrasal referent, as at John 11:6-7, for example. Instead, we find *sa* and *sildaleiks*, both masculine. It is possible that the Gothic masculine refers back to *stains*, which suggests a theologically coherent misreading of the verse: “This [stone] was from the Lord, and it [*sc.* the stone] is marvellous in our eyes.” Translating thus implies simply ignoring the gender of  $\alpha\tilde{\upsilon}\tau\eta$ . Alternatively, the Goth may have looked for a feminine antecedent for the feminine pronoun. Both  $\kappa\epsilon\phi\alpha\lambda\acute{\eta}$  and  $\gamma\omega\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$  are nearby. Although  $\kappa\epsilon\phi\alpha\lambda\acute{\eta}$  may have had the authority of the great commentator Origen behind it (Abbott 2006: §2622), it is rendered into Gothic as the neuter *haubib*, which cannot be the antecedent of *sa*. Thus, it would have to be  $\gamma\omega\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$  and *waihsta*: “This [corner] was from the Lord, and it [*sc.* the corner] is marvellous in our eyes.” Such an account suggests the Gothic translator was more attuned to grammatical than to theological concerns. Whichever of these explanations is preferred, a Semiticism has been removed from the Gothic Version, not however by replacement with a natively Gothic or Greek construction with the same meaning, but by altering the sense of the text.



## 5. Conclusions

There can be no doubt that Biblical Gothic is under the linguistic influence of the Greek New Testament, rather than of the Greek language in general. On multiple occasions, the degrees of adjectives are dealt with according to Semitic rather than Greek patterns. Similarly, Semitic-style adjectival genitives are transmitted unchanged into Gothic. While these grammatical Semiticisms could, at a stretch, be interpreted as strange but acceptable Greek, the adduced case of lexical Semitic influence is unintelligible without reference to the substrate.

In the case of *jabai*, an additional point is to be made. The failure of most Gothic dictionaries and grammars to address the usage of Mark 8:12 (Example 7) illustrates the extent to which philologists have attempted to write about the language we wish we had, Gothic as spoken, as opposed to Biblical Gothic, the language actually available. It is to be hoped that the engagement with Gothic as a language of the Bible exhibited by Piras 2007 and 2009 will proliferate.

Finally, we see in the gender of Mark 12:10b-11 (Example 8), a further difficulty for the interpreter of Biblical Gothic: the translator's own occasional incomprehension of his source text. All of these elements point to the ongoing need for case-by-case analysis of cruces in the Gothic Bible, with overarching theories remaining susceptible to particular exceptions.

## References

- Abbot, E.A. 2006 (1906). *Johannine grammar, with a new foreword and bibliography*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- Bennett, W.H. 1980. *An introduction to the Gothic language*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Braune, W. & F. Heidermanns. 2004. *Gotische Grammatik: Mit Lesestücken und Wörterverzeichnis*. 20. Auflage. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Falluomini, C. 2017. Zum gotischen Fragment aus Bologna II: Berichtigungen und neue Lesungen. *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 146. 284-294.
- Friedrichsen, G.W.S. 1926. *The Gothic version of the Gospels: A study of its style and textual history*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gesenius, W. 1910. *Hebrew grammar*, translated by A.E. Cowley. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hogeterp, A. & A. Denaux. 2018. *Semitisms in Luke's Greek*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Kortlandt, F. 2001. The origin of the Goths. *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 55. 21-25, cf. [www.kortlandt.nl/publications/art198e.pdf](http://www.kortlandt.nl/publications/art198e.pdf) (accessed 31.10.2017).
- Lambdin, T.O. 2006. *An introduction to the Gothic language*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- Lehmann, W.P. 1986. *A Gothic etymological dictionary*. Leiden: Brill.
- Piras, A. 2007. *Manuale di Gotico. Avviamento alla lettura della versione gotica del Nuovo Testamento*. Roma: Herder.
- Piras, A. 2009. La resa di alcuni semitismi sintattici indiretti nella versione gotica della Bibbia. *Filologia Germanica/Germanic Philology* 1. 159-180.
- Regen, B. 1974. *Dictionary of the Biblical Gothic language*. Phoenix: Wellspring Books.
- Schäferdiek, K. 1981. Die Fragmente der 'Skeireins' und der Johanneskommentar des Theodor von Herakleia'. *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 110. 175-93
- Smyth, H. W. 1920. *A Greek grammar for colleges*, New York: American Book Company.
- Streitberg, W. 1910. *Die gotische Bibel. Zweiter Teil: Gotisch-griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Wright, J. 1954. *Grammar of the Gothic language: Second edition with a supplement to the grammar by O.L. Sayce*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*Author's address*

Brendan N. Wolfe  
 St Mary's College  
 University of St Andrews  
 KY16 9JP  
 United Kingdom  
[bw52@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:bw52@st-andrews.ac.uk)