

**Learning the Lord's Prayer in Gothic:
A Personal Best Achievement for American High School Students**

By Robert Oliphant

Dear Young Friends,

... Just as we know the word AMERICA goes back to someone's name, so we know our "American Language," as Noah Webster called it, goes back to earlier sources. The most recent of these is of course British English. But we also go back to Old English (before 1066) and even to so-called primitive Germanic, as represented by a translation of the Lord's Prayer from the original Greek into fourth century Gothic.

As a snapshot of our linguistic past, this Gothic translation is quite short (10 lines). But since many students, including me, have over the years learned these 10 lines by heart, I feel a brief look at this early text may stimulate your curiosity, enough so to encourage memorization of, say, the first five lines (only 20 words).

Our Gothic text will be followed by a word-by-word treatment that includes phonetic transcriptions of its Gothic pronunciation, its English translation, and some information about its linguistic history. Then we'll finish with some encouraging words about textual memorization, along with raising a key question for you and your friends to ponder, namely, is Gothic truly a "primitive language"?

NUANCE

THE LORD'S PRAYER IN GOTHIC

Atta unsar, þu in himinam,
weihnai namo þein.

qimai þiudinassus þeins,
wairþai wilja þeins,
swe in himina jah ana airþai.

Hlaif unsarana þana sinteinan gif uns himma daga.

jah aflet uns þatei skulans sijaima,
swaswe jah weis afletam þaim skulam unsaraim.

jah ni briggais uns in fraistubnjai,
ak lausei uns af þamma ubilin.

PRONUNCIATIONS, DEFINITIONS, AND NOTES. . . . The beginning of a sentence is indicated by S. The last word of each line is followed by five asterisks.

[S1: line 1] ATTA . . . /aht" ah/ [as in OUGHT + AH] "father" The keyboard phonetic symbols are those of Random House Unabridged, which can be accessed via www.dictionary.com (it's the first one) and includes an audio version for each entry word. In this system a double apostrophe indicates primary syllabic stress and a single apostrophe indicates secondary stress ATTA turns up in Old Irish as AITHAIR, in Latin as PATER, and in modern English as FATHER. . . . Also as ATT-ILA, literally "little father" in Attila the Hun. . . . ULF-ILAS, literally "little wolf" is the name of our courageous translator-bishop (A.D.311 -382) , who braved the perils of eastern Europe and the barbaric OSTRO-GOTHS, literally "eastern Goths," cf. the "dying Goth" statue done in Pergamum (Bergama, Turkey). The VISI-GOTHS (literally "west" Goths were very successful in invading Europe, cf. "[V] Andalusia," for instance, is derived from its Vandal conquerors. Overall "Goth" is synonymous with "Germanic": Gothic architecture, the Almanac de Gotha, etc.

UNSAR . . . /un" sahr/ [FULL + ARE] "our" cf. UNSER in modern German [German, Dutch, Swedish, English, and Gothic are all closely related and classified as Germanic languages].

THU . . . /thoo/ [as in TOO] "thou" [the non-keyboard symbol in our text (sometimes called "thorn") requires use of the keyboard-friendly digraph TH] .

IN /ihn/ [as in IN "in" same as today.

HIMINAM /hihm" ihn am/ [as in HIM + IN + in TOM] "heaven." Cf. German HIMMEL. As indicated by the –AM suffix (accusative case ending), Gothic is more of an inflected language than English: a feature which gives Bishop Ulfilas more freedom in his word sequences.

(line 2) WEIHNAI /weyh" nigh/ [as in WEIGH + THIGH] "be hallowed" The -NAI is a passive suffix. For the root, cf. German WEI-NAHT "hallowed night." English spelling, thanks to the Great Vowel Shift just before Shakespeare's time, is no longer as "phonetic" as the spelling systems of Spanish and Italian

NAMO /nah" ah/ "name" cf. Latin NOMEN and Anglo-Latinate NOMENCLATURE.

THEIN /theyn/ "thy" actually "thine," possessive of THOU.

[S2 line 3] QIMAI /kwihm" igh/ "may come" optative form of COME. [related to Latin VENIO (the W goes back to the Latin V, which stayed on after the K was dropped. Remember these Germanic tribes were small, idiosyncratic, and creative — just like modern families with different names for bathroom functions].

THIUDINASSUS /thee" ud ih na'suhs/ "language power," cf. German DEUTSCH and Old English THEOD, along with the suffix –NESS ("goodness," etc.). Starting in western Asia these Indo-European tribes (formerly called "Indo-Germanic") invaded west and east (India and Persia) in conquering waves. As a group these two words mean "May thy language power come." As an inflected language like Latin, Gothic does not depend exclusively on word order to signal word and phrase relationships.

THEINS /theyns/ [as in REINS] "thy." Plural possessive of THOU.

(line 4) WAIRTHAI /wighrth" thigh/ [as in WIRE + THIGH] "come into being." Optative form, cf. German WERDEN Standard English pronunciation, thanks to the "great vowel shift" (1500-1650) doesn't fit English spelling, as opposed to Spanish and Italian.

WILJA /wihl" yah/ [WILL+ RAW "will"

THEINS /theyns/ [as before] "thy." As a group these three words mean "May thy will come into being."

[line 5] SWE /sweh/ [as in LET for the vowel] “so” or “thus.”

IN /ihn/ [same as above] “in.”

HIMINA /hihm” in ah/ [first 2 syllables same as above] “heaven” (dative singular).

JAH /yah/ “and” [as in YAW]

ANA /ahn” ah/ [as in ON + AH] “upon”

AIRTHAI /ighrth” ay/ as in IRISH + AYE] “earth” As a group the six words mean “thus in the heaven and on earth.”

[S3: line 6] HLAIF /hligf/ [as in LIFE preceded by H] “loaf.” Like Old English CORN and its Latinate cognate GRAIN, the word LOAF suggests that the Indo-Europeans may have started out as farmers, very possibly in Russia, before becoming herdsman-invaders.

UN SARANA /uns” sar an’ a/ [as above] “our.” The –ANA element signals accusative plural (“direct object”) case.

THANA /thah” na/ “the.” The –AN signals accusative case.

SINTEINAN /sihn teyn” ahn/ “daily” in the sense of “day after day” after” (cf. SIN as in “since” and TEIN as in “time,” i.e., “our loaf, the past-present time (one). Even the Greeks and Romans had trouble keeping track of individual days, i.e., identifying specific days as before or after, say, the Ides of March just as we use the hour as a reference point in “ten before twelve” versus “ten after twelve.” Anthropologically considered, we might say the Goths were strong on “day” as opposed to “night,” but shaky on “day” as a unit of chronological measurement.

GIF /gihf/ [might have been pronounced /yif/, according to Prokosch and other Germanicists], “give” As in English today, the imperative form doesn’t call for a suffix.

UNS /uhs/ “us.” Cf. German.

HIMMA /hih” mah/ “this,” closer to “hence” in the sense of “this time forward.”

DAGA /dah” ga/ “day.” The sense of these eight words can be stated as “Give to us this day our grain cooked on a regular basis.” The word LORD, incidentally, was spelled HLAF-WARD, literally “guardian of the loaf.”

[S5: line 7] JAH [as before] /yah/ "and"

AFLET /ahf leht"/ "excuse," literally "off-let/ let off."

UNS . . . /uhns/ "us"

THATEI /thaht" ey/ "[if] that."

SKULANS. . . . /skul ahns/ [as in SKULL + ahns] "people who engage in skulduggery." Cf. German SCHULD "guilt" "debt." The concept of "debt" must have been unfamiliar to the Goths, along with double-entry bookkeeping and "credit." Some Protestant religions substitute TRESPASS for DEBT, probably in the sense of "offense, sin, wrong" (definition 3 in the Random House Unabridged entry. The Greek has OPHEILEMATA , cf. Ophelia.

[It's worth noting here that Gothic is clearly NOT a primitive language in terms of its pronunciation (very much like German) or its grammar (more complicated than ours, certainly). But its overall vocabulary IS primitive, i.e., smaller (cf. the University of Texas Goth lexicon) and more limited in expressing ideas like "kingdom," "debt," and "temptation." Today, for example, the vocabulary of Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English (SWADE, pronounced SUEDE) presented via Random House Unabridged is 315,000 entries. Excluding proper names, foreign words, and phrases, this translates into 200,000 headword-definition combinations for potential use in our crossword puzzles and spelling bees.]

SIJAIMA. . . . /see yah" ma" "might be" Structurally this clearly reads "and let us off (forgive us) if that we might be [subjunctive] people who engage in skulduggery." But Bishop Ulfilas must have had difficulty finding a cultural equivalent for Greek OPHEILEMA/MATA "debts." Nomads, after all, had little truck with credit and credit ratings, in which connection it's worth noting the Biblical stand against lending money.

[line 8] SWASWE /swah" sweh/ "just as"

JAH /yah/ "also"

WEIS /ways/ "we" ®

AFLETAM /ahf" leht" ahm/ [as in OFF+LET+AHM "excuse," [probably in the sense of "let it pass."]

THAIM . . . /thighm/ [THYME] “those who”

SKULAM . . . /sku” uhm/ “engage in skulduggery”

UN SARUM . . . /uns ahr” uhm/ “[against] us” In three-syllable words, it’s likely that Gothic place the accent upon the next-to-last syllable (sometimes call the “penultimate” or “penult.”

[S5: line 9] JAH . . . /yah/ “and”

NI . . . /nih/ “no” “not”

BRIGGAIS /brihg ays/ [the first G probably represents a velar nasal as in /tangh/ for TANG] the ending is second person imperative “you understood”). The grammar of so called “primitive” languages can be very complex. Eskimo, for instance has a dual number along with singular and plural, e.g., “one muk” (1 slipper), “two mul-luk” (2 slippers).

UNS . . . /uhns/ “us”

IN . . . /ihn/ “in”

FRAISTUBNJAI . . . /frighst” ub nyigh/ “temptation.” FRAISAN “to be agitated” comes pretty close to “temptation,” but the construction, though cited by the U. of Texas Gothic dictionary doesn’t make much sense part by part. The Greek word for “temptation” in the Lord’s Prayer is PEIRASMON, which is also cited in the Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon. The base-form PEIRAO “attempt” (also linked to PIRATE) establishes a literal basis for “temptation,” but not a strong one. George Ricker Berry’s Interlinear Greek-English New Testament offers a special section that covers over 300 “basic concepts” — sin, profligacy, lust, evil, drunkenness, etc. — but omits temptation.

[line 10] AK . . . /ahk/ “but”

LAUSEI . . . /laws” igh/ [LOUSE+EYE] “loosen” (deliver)

UNS . . . /uns/ “us”

AF . . . / ahf/ “off” (from)

THAMMA . . . /tham” ah/ “those” (i.e. “them”)

UBILIN . . . /oob" ihl ihn/ ["evil" (cf. German übel). . . The –IN is an oblique case ending (ablative) paralleling those of Latin and Sanskrit.

[FINAL NOTE. . . Even though the Greek New Testament includes the last two lines ("Power and the Glory"), the Ulfilas translation omits them, as is also the case in the Codex Argenteus in Upsala, Sweden, which contains the full translation: the four Gospels and several Epistles). One possible explanation for this omission centers on Ulfilas himself and his personal commitment to Manicheanism and to a very popular Gnostic-Christian sect, Nestorianism, led by Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople. Though later declared heretic, Asiatic Nestorianism spread all the way to China and was famous for centuries as the fabled home of Prester John, for whom Marco Polo searched in vain a thousand years later.]

WHAT'S NEXT. . . I believe any high school student will get a lot of personal-best satisfaction by attacking the following challenges.

Speaking . . . This requires pronouncing each word syllable by syllable at first and then moving on to sentence by sentence mastery. This will not be easy, since the spelling-sound patterns of Gothic often conflict with our American patterns. One solution is that of pronouncing each letter as though it were Spanish (my Chaucer students will vouch for its effectiveness). Pay attention to the stressed syllable identifications and try to give each sentence and "all in one breath" flow. In a selling-emphasis society, your improvement in pronunciation clarity will pay rich dividends later on.

Learning the text by heart . . . Attack the first five lines first. After that, decide if you're up to taking on the whole show. If you do, consider what actors often do: i.e., reciting the target very fast or engaging in physical challenges. Don't worry about finding listeners to applaud your achievement, though. Be it poetry or prose, a memorized text will always be a permanent mental possession — and friend.

Use your memorized text creatively . . . A traditional challenge is that of matching your text up with a familiar melody. This is relatively easy if you permit two or more syllables to occupy one beat (subdivision or hold out one syllables over two or more beats to be. Here's a "four beat" matching of our first sentence to the melody of the Alphabet Song (stressed beats in caps): AT-ta UN-sar THU in him-in NAM . / WEI- [hold] NAI [hold] NA-mo THEIN . /. If you're ambitious try your hand a matching up our target with Albert Hay Malotte's famous setting of the Lord's Prayer. More ambitiously, especially when you can't sleep, try matching up specific

words with synonyms and related words.

Grow, grow, grow! It's true that educational success (grades, test scores, etc.) is important for your future. But in the long run what's inside your head is more important than what may be gathering dust in a scrapbook ten years from now. So don't be afraid to learn texts and songs, lots of them, all the way through. One of my granddaughters memorized the Gettysburg example almost fifteen years ago, and she'll still benefitting from it — especially in the spoken-effectiveness department.

TO CONCLUDE As you may have notes, I've squeezed our "what's next" into a four-letter memory-friendly acronym, namely SLUG — i.e., S for speaking, L for learning, U for use, G for grow. As for Gothic itself, I'm certain that we can agree it's a clearly a non-primitive language, especially with respect to its phonetic and grammatical system, enough so to support the anthropologists' assertion that "there are no primitive languages" (first stated in the thirties by Franz Boas).

On the other hand, I think we can also agree that the limited vocabulary of Gothic can itself be fairly be described as primitive, especially when compared with that of Greek or Latin in the same time frame: cf. the University of Texas online Gothic dictionary (www.utexas.edu/gotoal), as compared with the Liddell-Scott Greek Lexicon (Alice Liddell, the lead author's daughter, was the model for Alice in Wonderland, incidentally), along with the monumental Thesaurus Linguae Latinae (c.f., Wikipedia).

To be more specific regarding lexical primitivism: Out of roughly six billion potential speakers on this planet, almost half of them are currently familiar with what's now called "Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English" (SWADE, pronounced "suede"), which is also the language used most frequently for the publication of original scientific research, as noted by Charles Ferguson in his studies of "diglossia." So I hope your personal vocabulary growth very, very seriously all through your life.

This is not to say that you should start working the New York Times Crossword Puzzle every day. But you should certainly encourage your family and friends to test you with headword-definition questions like "Please spell the 7-letter word whose first phonetic transcription in the electronic Random House Webster's College Dictionary is /suh pawrt"/ and whose fifth definition (out of 16) is 'to uphold or advocate.'" Since RHC has 56,000 headword-definition combinations, a random- sample test of 30 such combinations will produce an authoritative® estimate of your vocabulary's size (surprisingly high, you'll find).

For me, this modest project has been a labor of affection. Over the years I've often thought of Ulfilas: his family, what he studied, why he became a missionary, how he got the Goths to trust

him, what the weather and food were like. . As in often the case with retired lexicographers, our relationship started with the Lord's Prayer in Gothic a modest 10-line. But I hope you agree that

Though not a growth industry, lexicography and lexicology can put us in touch with distant speakers far more intimately and sympathetically than digging up their graves, I feel. So I hope some of that feeling comes across to those who read this short piece, enough so to surface now and then when an interesting word turns up.

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