The Origin of the Finnish Word *Joulu* ('Christmas')

In December 1992 the Jewish community center in Helsinki invited its members to a ceremony to mark the 75th Independence Day of Finland, to be held in the synagogue. The term used in the invitation was *juhlavuosi*, 'anniversary,' literary 'celebration year.' Since the Jewish community is bilingual, Finnish and Swedish, the invitation was in both languages and I noticed that the Swedish word used in this occasion was *jubileumsår* 'year of jubilee.' The word *jubileum* is of biblical Hebrew origin. It origin is the word *yovel* 'ram's horn.'

When reading the invitation, it somehow crossed my mind that maybe the word *juhla* is also of Hebrew origin. I stood up, went to the bookshelf and fetched up the dictionary of contemporary Finnish. Here is the translation of the 'juhla' entry:

"A Germanic loan-word. The original Germanic word was reconstructed as **jehwla, *je(γ)wla* from which the words denoting *Christmas* in Scandinavian languages: *jul* or *jol*, were later developed. Although the word *juhla* appears only in Finnish and not in other Finno-Baltic languages, its forms suggests that it is an older loan-word than *joulu* ['Christmas']. This is also implied by the semantic relations, since the word *juhla* may carry the meaning 'Christmas' in several Finnish dialects."

Here is the translation of the 'joulu' entry:

"A Scandinavian loanword having the same origin as contemporary Swedish *jul*. The same word was borrowed also into the Vatja language (joulu) and Estonian (jõul). Its original meaning was a 'midwinter pagan celebration', but the meaning altered along the establishment of Christianity, already before the word was adopted by the Finns of

the Baltic Sea. The word 'juhla', which from the etymological point of view belongs to the same family group, was adopted earlier, and it has a more general meaning."

The Journal of the Finnish-Ugric Society (1906, p. 15) adds the Gothic word *jiuleis* and the Old Icelandic *ẏlir* to the same family of words. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, also the English word *Yule* belongs to the same group.

The word *jubileum* is clearly of Hebrew origin. In a lecture given during a seminar of the Hebrew language, organized by the Jewish Community in Helsinki on November 5, 1989, Professor Joshua Blau, then the president of the Academy of the Hebrew Language mentioned this word:

"In several instances biblical Hebrew expressions were adopted by European languages and in the process, their meanings were changed in those languages. Being established in the European languages, those words also received new meanings in contemporary Hebrew. The word *yovel* originally meant a ram's horn. Blowing the horn marked the beginning of the 50th year when all slaves were freed and the land was returned to its original owners. In this manner the word *yovel* started to mean 50 years. When the word was transmitted from the Bible into European languages, still one more thing happened: it has been used also to mark a 50th anniversary (for example *jubilee* in English). Indeed, this European meaning is the present sense of Hebrew *yovel*."

In short, *jubileum* is of Hebrew origin, and if *joulu* is also of Hebrew origin, I should explain where the consonant *b* or *v* and the vocals *i* and *e* have disappeared. Linguistic changes do not happen arbitrarily.

I suggest that the Gothic ward *jiuleis* is the key to solve this puzzle.

The origin of the Gothic tribes was probably the area of nowadays southern Sweden. They left their abode around 2000 years ago and settled north of the border of the Roman Empire. From there they once in a while conducted hostile military expeditions across the border. In the 3rd century they invaded Asia-Minor, and when they returned

north they took with them captives. Of those captives there were Christians and eventually those captives converted the Goths into Christianity. Bishop Wulfila, who translated the Bible into Gothic in the 4th century, was a descendant of those captives. The word *jiuleis* is part a month name, *fruma jiuleis*, that appears in a Christian calendar in the Gothic language, apparently from the 6th century. (See image.)

When writing God's name, Jews have been using abbreviation. Early Christians continued this method and expanded it to words that they considered to be holy. Nowadays these words are called *nomina sacra*, 'holy words.' There are many such words in the Gothic translation of the Bible.

I suggest that the Gothic word *jiuleis* is such an abbreviation. In this form it means 'Redeemer.' In the *Book of Leviticus* chapter 25, the word *yovel* is associated with the release of slaves.

I cannot claim that my explanation is waterproofed, however, at least from the linguistic point of view it is a possible one. One must also remember that the definition 'midwinter pagan celebration' is also an assumption based upon oral tradition gathered many centuries later.

Common sense entails a much more natural explanation. One may assume that early Christians would have named a celebration important to them with a word meaning a redeemer rather than adopting from their neighbors a name of a pagan event.

More information:
David Landau (2009). The Source of the Gothic Month Name *jiuleis* and its Cognates. *Namenkundliche Informationen* (Universität Leipzig). Vol. 95/96, pp. 239-248.

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A photo of the palimpsest upon which the Gothic calendar was preserved. The words *fruma jiules* are inside the frame that was added.