

## Otfrid's Preface to his Gospel Harmony, A.D. 870

[Courtesy of James Marchand, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1992 December 24  
(Formatted and revised by Theedrich, 1999 Jan 9, 2013 Oct 17)]

**Note by James Marchand:** “Otfrid’s preface to his Gospel Harmony, the first long rhyming poem in any language, was written about 870. A point to note is the technical grammar of the 9th century. Every line of this cries out for commentary. The Latin follows Dümmler, but is also found in Magoun’s or at Erdmann’s edition. A small example of the technical terms: Otfrid explains that “z” sounds like “stridor dentium.” Since this collocation is found so frequently in the Bible (“gnashing of teeth” in the KJV), it is not likely that Otfrid missed this. Martianus says (Dick, p. 96): “*Z*” *vero idcirco Appius Claudius detestatur, quod dentes mortui, dum exprimitur, imitatur.* (“[The author] Appius Claudius avoids ‘Z’ like the plague, because it sounds like the teeth of a dead man when it is uttered.”) Otfrid writes in a centonic [or patchwork] kind of manner, weaving together strands he has gotten from others, as one was supposed to do: culling the ancients. Note the mention of Hebrew.”

---

**Etymology of the name “Otfrid”:** “**Ot-**” comes from the Proto-Germanic \***auð-** meaning “fortunate, blessed.” It is related to Gothic **audags** “fortunate, blessed, blest,” and is the first component in the Germanic (Rugian) king **Odoacer**(Gothic **Auða-Wakrs** "Blessedly Alert"), who in 476 deposed the last Western Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustulus. (Odoacer was in turn defeated and killed by **Piuda-reiks** “Ruler of the Folk,” modern English **Peedrich**.) The name’s second component, “**-frid**,” derives from Proto-Germanic **frip** “peace,” found in many other words, for instance, in the Gothic proper name **Friþa-reiks** “Prince of Peace,” “Peaceful Ruler,” modern English **Fredrick**.**A.D. 870**

### OHTFRID'S LETTER TO LIUDBERT

To Liutbert, through the eminence of His Dignity and by divine grace the lofty Archbishop of Mainz, Ohtfrid, though unworthy, nevertheless by consecration a monk and lowly priest, wishes the joy of eternal life evermore in Christ.

Handing the present book over to your most excellent good sense, so that you may judge its style, at the outset I have taken care to tell you the reason why I presumed to write it, so that, if it is worthless, the minds of any of the faithful might not try to attribute it to the presumption of my worthlessness.

Wherefore, since at times the sound of useless things have beat on the ears of some men of highest quality, and the obscene song of laymen disturbed their sanctity, I was asked by certain brothers worthy of memory — and especially through the words of a certain reverend lady

named Judith who strongly urged me on — to write for them in German part of the Gospels, so that a small amount of the reading of this song might cancel out the play of worldly voices; and, occupied with the sweetness of the Gospels in their own language, they would be able to forego the sound of useless things; adding also to their petition the complaint that the poets of the pagans, such as Virgil, Lucan, Ovid and many others, embellished their deeds in their native language — with the sayings of whose works (*pun*) we know the world to be now awash (*shipwreck metaphor*, “*nafragium*”) — and that they even praised the deeds of the most-trying men of our religion — of Juvenecus, Arator, Prudentius and many others, who embellished the sayings and miracles of Christ properly in their own tongue; whereas we, although instructed by grace in that same faith, were, they said, lazy in putting forth the most brilliant splendor of the divine words in our own language.

Now therefore, since through love of those who were spurring me on, I could not refuse, I did it — not as a skilled person, but as one forced by brotherly petition. I wrote, that is, supported by the demand of their prayers, a portion of the Gospels set down in Frankish, mixing in now and then spiritual and moral words. So that whoever is put off by the difficulty of a foreign language in their regard, might comprehend the most holy words here in his own language, and understanding the law of God in his own language, might shrink from deviating from it even a little through his own thinking.

I wrote therefore in the first and the last parts of this book as a mediator between the four evangelists, so that between them I set down in order whatever now this one, then whatever that one might write, as far as I was able.

In the middle, however, so that the readers might perhaps not suffer greatly because of verbosity, I omitted many things, both of the parables of Christ and His miracles and His teaching, though quite weary already (for I put this out last), due to need, as mentioned above; and I no longer undertook, as I had started out, to set them down in order, but just as they occurred to my poor memory.

I have, then, divided this book into five books. Of them, the first commemorates the birth of Christ and ends with the baptism and the teaching of John. The second, His disciples already having been called together, tells how He revealed Himself to the world both by certain signs and by His most brilliant teaching. The third tells a little about the brilliance of the signs and the teaching to the Jews. The fourth tells then how, approaching His passion, He willingly suffered

death for us. The fifth calls to memory His resurrection, His conversation afterwards with His disciples, His ascension and the Day of Judgment. I have divided these into five, as I said, although there are four books of the Gospels, because their holy fourfold evenness glorifies the oddness of our five senses, and they turn all the superfluous things in us, not only of actions but also of thoughts, towards the exaltation of heavenly things.

Whatever sins we commit by sight, by smell, by touch, by taste or by hearing, we purge that depravity by the memory of that reading: let useless sight be obscured, illuminated by the gospel words; let evil hearing not be harmful to our hearts; let smell and taste restrict themselves from depravity and join in the sweetness of Christ, and let the innermost parts of the heart hold ever in memory these readings written in German.

For just as the chaotic wording (“barbarism”: a technical term) of this language is uncultivated and undisciplined and unaccustomed to being held in by the curbing rein of the art of grammar, so also, in many expressions, spelling is difficult because of the piling up of letters [e.g. **v v v**] or their unfamiliar sound. For sometimes, it requires three **U U U**, in my opinion, in its phonetics, the first two being consonants, so it seems to me, the third remaining a vowel sound [i.e., **/wu/**]. Sometimes again I have been unable to avoid the sounds of the vowels **A, E, I** or **U**. Although in such cases [i.e., umlauts **/ö/**, **/ü/**] the Greek **Y** seemed to me to be appropriate. And even this element this language sometimes spurns, joining itself to no character at all in any sound except with difficulty. This language quite frequently uses **K** and **Z** to an extent exceeding their usage in good Latin; the grammarians say that they are among the superfluous letters. They use **Z** in this language because, in my opinion, it sounds now and then like the “gnashing of teeth” (cf. Vulgate Mt 8:12, etc.; Martianus), and **K** because of its throaty sound. Quite often (though not always) it permits excessive use of that figure of metaplasm [cf. Donatus] which those learned in the grammatical arts call “*synaloephe*” [he means ellipsis, but we, too, are careless with such terms] (and unless the readers [listeners] pay attention to this, the words of a sentence sound wrong) in spelling, now preserving the letters in writing, now avoiding them in the manner of the Hebrew language, among whom there is the custom of completely omitting or skipping over the [vowel] letters themselves by *synaloephe* “within lines” [= in written text], as some say. — Not that the flow of this writing is condensed by metrical subtlety; rather, it always calls for the device of end-rhyme [“homeoteleuton”]. For in this reading material, the words at the end require an appropriate sonority proper for and similar to the beginning, And because of

this it quite often permits the collision of synaloephe not only between two vowels, but also between other letters; and if this is not done, drawing out the phonemes often makes the uttering of the words sound stilted. We will find that we too do this excessively in our ordinary speech, if we but listen carefully. For the poetics of this language requires from the readers both that they avoid a soft and slippery collision of synaloephe, and that authors observe end-rhyme [“homoeoteleuton”] (that is, the like ending of words). The sense, then, must occasionally be suspended here for more than two or three verses or even four in reading, so that is made clearer to the readers what the reading means. Here often “**I**” and “**O**” and other vowels like them are found written together, in sound sometimes remaining as distinct vowels, sometimes united (with the first going over into the force of consonants [i.e., as the semi-vowel /j/]). Also, while in proper Latin two negatives make the words of a clause affirmative, in the usage of this language they almost always negate. And though now and again I might have avoided this, yet because of daily usage, I took care to write as the rule of custom has it. For the character of this language permitted me to preserve neither number nor gender. For in it I have sometimes rendered a masculine of the Latin language by a feminine, and mixed the other genders as needed in a similar way. I have interchanged the plural number with the singular, the singular with the plural, and in this way I have perforce often fallen into strange wording [“barbarism”] and bad syntax [“solecism”]; see Donatus, *Barbarismus*].

I could set down from this book examples in German of all the above written vices, if I did not want to avoid the laughter of the readers; for when the uncultivated words of a rustic language are placed in the smoothness of Latin, they give rise to laughter among the readers. This language, you see, is considered to be rustic, because by its own speakers it has never been polished in writing or by any art at any time. Indeed, they do not commit to memory the stories of their forbears, as many other peoples do, nor do they embellish their deeds or life out of love of their worth. On the other hand, if, though rarely, this does happen, they expound rather in the language of other peoples, that is, Latin or Greek. They guard against errors in the others, but are not ashamed of them in their own. They are taken aback to transgress grammatical rule in the others even by a little letter, and in their own language they make errors almost in every word. A remarkable thing: that such great men, given to good judgment, outstanding in carefulness, supported by quick wit, known for wisdom, famous for sanctity, should translate all these things into the glory of a foreign language and not have the custom of writing in their own tongue.

It is fitting, however, that in whatever way, be it in corrupt or in language of perfect grammar, that mankind praise the author of all things, Who gave them the instrument of the tongue (Alcuin & Pippin) to sound the word of His praise among themselves, Who seeks in us not the worship of polished words but the pious mood of thought, the piling up of works in pious labor, not useless lip-service.

This book, therefore, I have taken care to transmit to your wise judgment for approval — because my humble self was educated by Raven [the Moor] of blessed memory, formerly worthy Bishop of your see — I have taken care to commend it to the dignity of your Bishopness and to the equal wisdom in you. If it pleases the vision of Your Holiness and should it not judge it to be to be rejected, may your authority grant that it be used freely by the faithful; but, if indeed it appears less fitting and is commensurate with my carelessness, may that same venerable and holy authority spurn it.

My humble little person, indeed, recommends that the judgment of either action be left up to your will. Amen. May the Supreme Trinity and the Perfect Unity of all things deign to keep you for a long time in an office of value, remaining in upright life. Amen.