

Introduction

Why Study Greek?

The New Testament was written in Koine (koi-NAY) Greek. It provided a magnificent medium for proclaiming the gospel message because Greek was so widely known after Alexander's conquests of the west and east. There are many challenges to mastering Greek: the difficulty of learning any language for those who are monolingual, differences in the alphabetic script, the highly structured grammatical nature of Greek, and the fact that Koine Greek is not spoken today. In order to conquer the difficulties of this journey, we need to know clearly why we are undertaking this awesome endeavor.

God used Greek to communicate. If aliens had come to this planet and left documents explaining how the universe functions and how humans can make a contribution to the galaxies and ultimately attain eternal life, with certain genetic modifications, of course, there would be tremendous interest in decoding this incredible message. Indeed, one has come from another world and has addressed all the major issues of life/death, meaning/meaninglessness, joy/sorrow, love/hate, presence/absence, right/wrong that provide the matrix of human existence. God has spoken in His son (Heb. 1:1–2; Jn. 1:14, 18) whose life was recorded in the stories of those who witnessed and experienced this divine encounter. The writer of John notes that he was an eyewitness of the life of Christ, saying “This is that disciple who saw these events and recorded them here. And we all know that his account of these things is accurate” (Jn. 21:24). The writer knew and witnessed that these divine truths were confirmed not only by a single witness, but by a community of witnesses he identified as “we.” The purpose of this recorded message was to provide a factual basis for belief and a guide to life: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” This is the good news, the gospel. It was recorded so that others, even denizens of the third millennium after Christ, may have the privilege of being able to hear its wonderful message. If our understanding of the message is cloudy, so will our thinking and belief on these matters of great import.

The prophets also recognized that they spoke messages from God (Amos 3:8). Jeremiah, when asked why he prophesied, clearly stated, “The LORD sent me to prophesy” (Jer. 26:12). He heralded warnings against those who “are prophets of deceit, inventing everything they say” (Jer. 23:25f.). Many, even in our day, like to project their own thoughts into the mouth of God, feeling compelled to bend the text to whatever ideology or agenda they are seeking to promote. Learning Greek will help us reverse that process.

These recorded messages from God may be carefully and passionately studied as one would read an email from one's beloved. So the psalmist writes, “I will study your commandments and reflect on your ways. I will delight in your principles” (Ps. 119:15f.).

The New Testament writers also acknowledged that “no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophets themselves or because they wanted to prophesy. It was the Holy Spirit who moved the prophets to speak from God” (2 Pet. 1:21). Thus, because of the unique nature of this communication, we seek to carefully examine the message in its original form, stripping away the translations to hear the original message.

We desire to accurately unleash the meaning of God’s word. The unique nature of this communication did not stop when it was recorded as a static, culturally locked, historical text. No, the message came with the transforming power and presence of the One who gave it. So the writer of Hebrews observes, “For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are” (Heb. 4:12). It is our goal to hear this message more carefully and unleash its transforming power within this postmodern context in a way that is consistent with the original intent of the divine and human authors. Learning Greek will allow us to move one step closer to the source.

We need guidance for our lives. Because the Bible offers divine guidance for our lives, we want to carefully hear its message, clearly separating it from the myriad of voices that are calling for our attention in this information and media-saturated age. Learning Greek will help slow and quiet us so that we may hear the voice of God amid the din of modern marketing schemes. It is from Scripture that we seek to find moral guidance, as the psalmist said, “I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Ps. 119:11). It is there that we will find wisdom from sages, by listening and retaining their instructions. They admonished, “Lay hold of my words with all your heart; . . . Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words” (Prov. 4:4f.). It is in a close reading of the words of the biblical text that we will find wisdom.

The Scriptures open us up to a relationship with God. Jesus pointed out the connection of His words to life and relationship with God: “The very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn. 6:63). “Faith comes by hearing the word of God,” Paul tells us (Rom. 10:17). It is through reading and obeying His word that we come to know him. Greek will be a tool in disciplining our minds in the pursuit of life from God.

We enjoy hands-on reading. Finally, we like to experience things firsthand. Being dependent on another’s point of view or passively accepting the interpretation or spin of another is contrary to our desire to know and experience for ourselves. Learning Greek allows us to shed layers of intermediary voices to listen more closely to what God has said. That is not to say we should ignore the voices of others; but we should be able to read and evaluate for ourselves. All language communication is at points ambiguous and vague. Learning Greek will not solve all linguistic problems. However, knowing Greek will assist us in weighing and evaluating the possibilities in order to select the most appropriate options.

As a residual benefit, learning Greek will help us better understand English. Greek is a highly structured language and lies behind much of Latin, which in turn connects with English. Many have claimed that learning Greek has taught them much that was elusive in their previous study of English grammar.

Why Not Just Use Good Translations?

One may ask why we should not save time and energy by letting the linguistic experts do the translation work for us. There are several limitations of translations that are

overcome in reading Greek for ourselves. A personal reading of Greek allows for a closer reading of what the authors originally wrote. As one becomes aware of the writer's style, observing structures and idiosyncrasies that are only seen in reading Greek, one is better able to render what the author originally meant. Oftentimes what may be ambiguous in English is cleared up by the Greek. Cultural issues and metaphors that may be critical to understanding a passage are again more visible in the Greek original and often smoothed over into modern idioms. Translators must make choices, and often a Greek word may have a broad area of meaning, but in translation one English word must be chosen. There is not a perfect word-for-word match between languages. One who reads Greek is more aware of the breadth, diversity, and possibilities of meanings. To the one who can read Greek, the choices made by the translator are no longer buried by the translation.

Many politically correct biases are currently being read into modern translations. Being able to read it in Greek for ourselves helps cut through those modern spins to hear the original voices more clearly. Thus, while translations are quite helpful, being able to read the original Greek has many benefits.

One final word should be voiced in terms of improper motivations for learning Greek. A person may want to learn Greek to get ahead of others or because it is impressive and authoritative to say, "In the Greek it means. . . ." Learning Greek must be coupled with humility or it will do more damage than good. It is also not good to learn Greek because we have some specific agenda we are pushing and desire to add a Greek cannon to blast out our theme. Listening to the voice of God needs to be the focus more than proving our particular point of view. Loving God and others is the goal, not putting ourselves up on an academic pedestal or putting others down because they do not share our "enlightened" perspective (Phil. 2:5ff.).

Why Do Many Say That Learning Greek Is Hard?

It's amazing, when you think of it. You can learn Koine Greek now and for the rest of your life you will be able to read the New Testament for yourself. Having said that, we've got some work cut out for us.

First, learning any new language is difficult. It's like learning to play basketball. Initially one stumbles while trying to dribble and run at the same time. Air-balls are shot, and how each position works is a mystery. One initially feels uncoordinated. With repetition, practice, and good coaching, a mastery is gained, and the game becomes a source of fun and refreshment while still retaining a sense of challenge. Greek will follow a similar pattern. There are certain fundamentals (passing, dribbling, footwork, positioning, etc.) that must be mastered in order to enjoy basketball. So also in Greek there are several foundational skills that must be mastered in order to have the enjoyment of reading Greek.

Here are some hints. "Inch by inch it's a cinch, yard by yard it's too hard." Applied to Greek, what this means is, Greek is learned best by taking little steps because large ones (staying up all night cramming) may trip you up. "The turtle wins the race" in Greek. Consistent daily study is better than pressure-filled weekly cram sessions that lead to quick learning and quick forgetting. "Step by step you scale the mountain." When you do not understand something, ask for help or go over it until you understand it. If you don't "get it," work on it, but continue on. Frequently the picture will become clearer further down the road. Repetition, persistence, and small bites are the three keys. Be careful

about missing a step. In some ways it's like math. If you miss a step, it catches up with you later on.

Your mastery of Greek will depend on learning three things: vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. In order to retain the vocabulary, it is suggested that you write the words on flash cards. Recently, we have provided flashcards with graphics on them to help you remember using images. These cards can be carried with you and reviewed frequently in the brief moments between the activities of your life. If you enjoy using the web for review, there is an online Vocabulary Builder available at all times with free mp3 downloads that have musical backgrounds to help make the process enjoyable and relaxing. There are 5,437 different Greek words in the New Testament (the lexicon has all of them listed). We will learn those that occur most frequently. By learning the words used more than 50 times, 313 words, you will be able to read about 80 percent of the New Testament (Mounce, *Basics*, 17). It will be important to say the words out loud. The mouth can teach the ear. The interactive program will allow you to hear how Greek is being pronounced and drill you with biblical examples. Seeing is one way of learning, but hearing adds another gateway into your memory. You may want to make associations or wordplays in English or mentally picture the object to which the word refers. Repetition is the best teacher. The program and the *Vocabulary Builder* will help reinforce your mastery of the vocabulary.

The morphology (how the words are formed; e.g., book/books; “s” indicates a plural) and syntax (the grammar of how words come together into sentences: subject/verb/object/modifier) will require brain aerobics. Here is where the mental wrestling will take place. Some of the concepts will be difficult to grasp initially. We will try to start with explanations from English and then move to Greek, showing how Greek makes a similar move. The problem is that many do not understand English grammar. We will build the language from parts of speech—nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, conjunctions, and prepositions. Many of these will take different endings, depending on how they are used. These ending and forms will be mastered in a series of twenty-something memorable chants. Mastering these sets of endings will be a good part of the course early on. “Inch by inch it's a _____.”

The parts of speech will work in sentences. The syntax, or relationships between words, will manifest roles for words, such as subjects, verbs, objects, and modifiers. These concepts will be illustrated in the context of the drills and exercises taken directly from Scripture. Some of these concepts may not come initially but continue on, and the eureka moments will come as you look back. It is of great benefit to work out examples. Frequent reviews are also critical for making the connections. Small, frequent breaks, dividing and repeating the material in short study sessions, help avoid an overwhelming sense of frustration and gives the needed space to regain the motivation needed to continue on.

Another factor that has shown itself to be critical, if one is taking Greek in a class, is staying plugged into the community of those learning Greek. It is not advisable to skip classes or assignments as that often leads to serious difficulty. If you miss a step you may end up on your face because learning Greek is sequential. Catching up becomes harder and harder. Being in class has proved itself important. Be there!

Studying with a “buddy” is also very helpful. Two heads are better than one in trying to understand sticky points. Teamwork is frequently necessary if you want to play in the

game, and it makes the learning task a little more enjoyable. This will provide incremental accountability as we move chapter-by-chapter through the material.

Time and consistency on this task is the key to mastering Greek. Learning Greek is a good time to tone your mental muscles. At points, the urge will surge to quit and give up. At those points remember why you are tackling Greek in the first place. Remember the inch-by-inch principle. Take one small step at a time. Do not worry about the big picture. Take the next little step and review, review, and review. After you've climbed a while, you may be encouraged to look back and see how far you have come. Giving up is fatal. You learned English, which in many ways is harder than Greek. It just takes time and energy. Hopefully, we will make that time fun, and you will be able to see some of the rewards along the way.

Several learning resources are available to help you. First, you will have access to printed materials in the form of easily printed materials in Adobe Acrobat PDF file formats. The printed materials will include this etextbook and an eWorkbook. For each chapter in the book, a one- or two-page summary has been developed, distilling the essence of the chapter (see appendix 3). The book will teach and structure the concepts, and the workbook will allow you to practice and reinforce what you have learned. The *Mastering New Testament Greek* interactive program will present the same material in a interactive multimedia format, with sound and immediate responses. The benefit of this is that after presenting the material, the computer will drill you over the material, giving you immediate feedback on how well you have done. In the future we will have streaming video and interactive materials available online. Thus there are four ways to approach this: in-class instruction, printed materials and workbook exercises, interactive multimedia, and online resources. The point is to use whatever combination works best for you. The font supplied with *Mastering New Testament Greek* is also available in your word processor. Learning to type in Greek can be a real time-saver and looks impressive in other classes and papers.

There are two resources beyond these that may be helpful: (1) a Greek New Testament, either the UBS 4th edition or Nestle-Aland 27th edition New Testament text (the Westcott/Hort/Robinson New Testament text available online at: http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/index.cfm, and (2) *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., by Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (BDAG). William Mounce's *Basics of Biblical Greek* or Gerald Stevens's *New Testament Greek* are both good first-year grammar resources if you want to supplement the materials here. There are several advanced grammars and mp3 audio resources at our web site for free. 1 John is found there with Mozart in the background which actually helps make it more memorable.

What Is Koine or New Testament Greek?

Greek is one of the oldest members of the Indo-European family of languages. Other members of this family are Sanskrit, which is older, and Latin (the Romance languages: French, Spanish, etc.), which is younger. English is derived from the Teutonic branch and Russian from the Slavic branch of the Indo-European family. Hebrew is found in a totally different, Semitic family of Near Eastern languages, akin to Aramaic, Akkadian, Arabic, Ugaritic, and others.

The Greek language has developed through five stages:

1. *Formative Period (pre–900 B.C.):* This period extended from “Linear B” (ca. 1200 B.C.) down through the time of Homer (ca. 900 B.C.).
2. *Classical Period (900–300 B.C.):* The Classical Period was from the time of Homer down to Alexander the Great (330 B.C.). There were numerous dialects during this period (e.g. Doric, Aeolic, and Ionic). Attic, a branch of Ionic, became the predominant dialect at Athens and was used by most of the famous classical Greek authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Thucydides, and others.
3. *The Koine Period (330 B.C.–A.D. 330):* As Alexander unified Greece and needed a single Greek language for his army before he could begin to spread Hellenistic culture through the ancient world, many of the subtleties of classical Greek were lost. Greek was simplified and changed as it interfaced with, and was influenced by, other cultures. This common language came to be known as Koine (common) Greek. It was in this language that the Septuagint (LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament), the New Testament, and the works of the early church fathers were written. The nature of Koine eluded modern scholars because of its simplicity when compared to Classical Greek. This led some scholars in the nineteenth century to explain it as a “Holy Ghost” language, created just for the Bible. In the early part of the twentieth century, Deissmann, Moulton and others found that the recently discovered Egyptian papyri, inscriptions, and ostraca were written in the same common everyday language used by the New Testament. God speaks in the language of the people. At points the New Testament will manifest Hebraisms, where the influence of Hebrew and/or Aramaic may be seen.
4. *The Byzantine Period (A.D. 330–1453):* During the Byzantine Period, Greek was spoken in the eastern half of the Roman empire, which was centered in Constantinople. In 1453 Constantinople fell to the Turks. That concluded this period. Tension between the Greeks and Turks persists until this day.
5. *The Modern Period:* The Modern Period dates from 1453 to the present. Modern Greek is closer to Koine than it is to Classical Greek. Modern pronunciation and grammatical structures, however, are quite different from the Greek that Jesus spoke. We will focus on Koine Greek. As recently as 1982, major changes have taken modern Greek further from its Koine roots. In the latest edition of Standard Modern Greek, established by the Center for Educational Studies in Greece, the number of accents has been reduced to one, the breathing marks dropped and the dative case, middle voice and optative mood are not present in modern Greek. The recent merging of *katharevousa* (hybrid of ancient and Modern used for official and academic purposes) has given way to the more populace oriented Demotic (ca. 1976) as Modern Standard Greek which is another step further away from Koine (vid. Holton, Mackridge and Philippaki-Warburton, [Greek: A Comprehensive Grammar of the Modern Language](#) (Routledge, 1997) or [Greek Today: a Course in the Modern Language and Culture](#) (Dartmouth College Press, 2004) by Peter Bien, Dimitri Gonicas, et al. Those looking for advanced grammars on Koine should pursue books by Stanley Porter, Daniel Wallace and David Black, as well as the articles by James Boyer and books by A. T. Robertson, Moulton and Burton freely available on the web-site and this disk.