

# Appendix A: The Basics of Biblical Greek

## The Greek Language

Greek is a member of the Indo-European family of languages, which includes most of the languages spoken in Europe (such as English, Spanish, French, German, and Irish) and some spoken elsewhere (such as Persian and Sanskrit). The Greek language in antiquity consisted of a number of closely related dialects, the most studied of which are Attic (Athenian) Greek and Koine (New Testament) Greek.

The English name of the language is derived from Latin. The Romans first encountered Greeks living in southern Italy, in a region they called *Magna Græca*, and so named these people *Græci*. The Greek name for themselves is Ἕλληνες *Hellēnes*. Scholars still use words derived from this when describing the ancient Greeks, most notably *hellenize*, which means *to make something Greek*.

“Koine” comes from the Greek κοινή *koinē*, meaning *common*. This was the *lingua franca* of the entire Eastern Mediterranean region in Jesus’ day, spoken and understood by virtually everybody. The educated upper classes of the Western Mediterranean could also speak at least some Koine Greek, making it the ideal language for the early spread of the Christian message.

Jesus himself probably spoke some Greek, but his day-to-day language was almost certainly Aramaic, a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew. (The Jews of Jesus’ day seem not to have distinguished the two, in fact.) Although a small but vocal minority of modern scholars argues that the Gospels and Acts were originally written in Aramaic, it is generally agreed that they were composed in Greek. Since, however, Jesus’ preaching was originally in Aramaic, there is a small number of places where difficult passages can be explained by assuming a mistranslation from an Aramaic original.

Greek is also the language of the first translation of the Old Testament. This is called the Septuagint, from the Latin for *seventy* (generally referred to by the letters LXX, the Roman numeral for *seventy*). According to a tradition preserved in the Letter of Aristeas, 72 Israelites (six from each tribe) miraculously completed the translation in 72 days, which accounts for the connection between the name of this Greek translation and the number “seventy.” The Septuagint was made in the third century BC for the Greek king of Egypt, Ptolemy II, to include in the great library of Alexandria. It also became the common Bible for Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora who lived outside Palestine. Most of the quotations of the Old Testament in the New are based on the Septuagint.

## The Alphabet

There were a number of Greek alphabets in antiquity used by the various dialects. The Latin alphabet, for example, descends from the Greek alphabet used in southern Italy. Koine Greek uses the Attic alphabet, which is the standard Greek alphabet used today. It consists of twenty-four letters.

Letter	Name	Transliteration	Pronunciation
α A	alpha	a	a as in father

β B	beta	b	b
γ Γ	gamma	g	g
δ Δ	delta	d	d
ε E	epsilon	e	e as in <u>bet</u>
ζ Z	zeta	z	z
η H	eta	E	the e-sound of <u>grey</u>
θ Θ	theta	th	th as in <u>thick</u>
ι I	iota	i	the i-sound of <u>it</u> or <u>mach<u>i</u>ne</u>
κ K	kappa	k	k
λ Λ	lambda	l	l
μ M	mu	m	m
ν N	nu	n	n
ξ Ξ	xi	x	the ks-sound of <u>kicks</u>
ο O	omicron	o	o as in <u>c<u>o</u>t</u>
π Π	pi	p	p
ρ P	rho	r	r
σ Σ	sigma	s	s
τ T	tau	t	t
υ Υ	upsilon	u or y	the u-sound of <u>r<u>u</u>de</u>
φ Φ	phi	ph	f
ψ Ψ	psi	ps	ps as in <u>top<u>s</u></u>
χ X	chi	ch	ch as in <u>lo<u>ch</u></u> or the German <u>B<u>ach</u></u> (or k if that's easier)
ω Ω	omega	O	the o-sound of <u>co<u>at</u></u>

In this book we will give Greek words both in Greek letters and in English transliteration. Our transliteration uses  $\bar{e}$  and  $\bar{o}$  to distinguish the letters *eta* and *omega* from their short vowel counterparts, *epsilon* (*e*) and *omicron* (*o*). The other three vowels can represent either long or short vowel sounds, but we will not reflect this in the transliteration.

The pronunciations given are modern conventions and do not reflect the actual pronunciations of antiquity, nor those of modern Greek, which has a somewhat different sound system.  $\gamma$  is also pronounced like the ng of sing when before  $\kappa$ ,  $\xi$ ,  $\chi$ , or another  $\gamma$  (hence  $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\gamma\epsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$  *angelos* meaning “angel”).

As usually written, the lower-case *sigma* has two forms: the medial form ( $\sigma$ ) used at the beginning or in the middle of a word, and the final form ( $\varsigma$ ) used at the end of a word. It is also possible to use the so-called lunate sigma ( $\sigma$ ) for a lower-case sigma, with no alternate form used depending on its position in a word. This practice is growing in popularity but is still not general and will not be followed here.

There is another form for *iota*, the *iota* subscript, used in connection with some long vowels. By the time Greek orthography was standardized by the Byzantines, the *iota* in some grammatical forms or words had become silent. Rather than omit the letter altogether, they

made it smaller and repositioned it. Hence ἀνθρώπῳ *anthrōpō*, to the man, with a (silent) *iota* subscript.

There are three accent signs used when writing ancient Greek: acute (´), grave (`), and circumflex (˘, ˜, or ˝, depending on the font); only the acute is used in modern Greek. These accents were not in use in the first century and are Byzantine innovations, but they are universally used today even for pre-Byzantine texts. It is believed that the shapes of the accents were originally intended to reflect a pitch accent system; in modern times, however, an accented syllable is simply stressed (λόγος, LO-gos, word). There are various rules governing the accents, but we will not go into all of them here. In general, every word has exactly one accent. There are some small words that have no accent at all; the word that precedes them in a sentence may pick up a second accent to compensate for this. These are the only exceptions.

On occasion, a diaeresis (¨) is used as it is in English to indicate that two vowels should be pronounced separately instead of as a diphthong.

When a word begins with a vowel, it will have either a smooth breathing mark (᾿) or a rough breathing mark (ᾶ). The smooth breathing mark is silent, and the rough breathing mark is pronounced like an English h: ἀγορά *agora* market-place, and αἵρεσις *hairesis* sect). When a word begins with a diphthong, the breathing mark (and accent, if any) is placed over the second letter. When a word begins with a capital letter, the breathing mark (and accent, if any) is placed to its left.

Words beginning with *rho* always have a rough breathing mark (ῥήτωρ *rhētōr* public speaker).

## Grammar

Greek is an inflected language, with words changing their spelling and pronunciation depending on their function in the sentence. English has lost most of its inflections, with exceptions such as plural nouns (*prophet* and *prophets*), the possessive case (*chapel* and *chapel's*), pronouns (*I*, *my*, and *me*) and third person singular verbs (*I read the Book of Mormon* and *She reads the Book of Mormon*). The English of the KJV retains some verbal inflections since lost (see Appendix C on early modern English below). Greek, however, has a rich and complex set of inflections.

Inflected words in Greek are grouped into declensions (nouns and related words) or conjugations (verbs), indicating the pattern for the changes in the words' spelling. Nouns are said to be *declined* and verbs *conjugated*.

### Nouns

Greek nouns have *number*, *gender*, and *case*. This is also true for noun-like words such as pronouns and adjectives.

*Number* refers to how many of the noun there are: singular (one) or plural (more than one). Older Greek dialects such as Homeric Greek also have a dual number (two).

*Gender* is a grammatical concept related to the sex of an object (if it has one). Greek has three genders: masculine, neuter, and feminine. People and some animals will have the gender corresponding to their sex; gender is otherwise fairly arbitrary—that is, the gender of a noun, although related to the noun's morphology, has to be learned, particularly by beginning students.

Note that this is different from the personification of some objects in modern English. Ships in English, for example, do not have a female gender so much as they are metaphorically considered female with all the overtones thereof. The gender of ship in Greek is dependent on the exact noun used and may be simply neuter.

*Case* refers to what the noun is doing in the sentence. Greek has five noun cases:

*Nominative*, the subject of the sentence.

*Genitive*, rather like the English possessive, although with significantly broader use.

*Dative*, the indirect object of the verb.

*Accusative*, the direct object of the verb.

*Vocative*, used when speaking directly to someone.

Each of these noun cases has uses beyond what we have indicated here. For example, the dative can also be used as an instrumental dative, indicating what was used to do something (*I wrote with a pen*).

Prepositions are said to *govern* particular noun cases. The noun phrases which are their objects should be in a particular case to match the preposition. Some prepositions can govern more than one case. When this happens, the meaning changes slightly depending on the noun case being used. Learning which preposition governs which noun case is one of the challenges for the student of any Indo-European language that retains cases, Greek not the least.

Proper nouns are generally declined when they are of Greek origin (Socrates) or have been hellenized (Jesus). Non-Greek proper nouns are usually indeclinable (David, Abraham, Jerusalem); that is, their spelling never changes no matter their function in a sentence.

Adjectives are declined like nouns with the same gender, number, and case as the noun they modify.

Unlike Latin but like English, Greek has a definite article (*the*). The rules governing its use are different from those for English. For example, proper nouns generally have the article. As with other Indo-European languages which have a definite article, it is declined like an adjective.

Greek did not originally have a set of third person pronouns. It tended to borrow demonstratives (this, that) or occasionally relative pronouns (who, which) when it needed a third person pronoun. By New Testament times, these had developed into full-fledged pronouns.

## Verbs

The verb system for Greek is particularly complex. Verbs have *mood*, *tense*, *voice*, *person*, and *number*.

The main moods for a Greek verb are:

*Infinitive*. This corresponds to the infinitive or gerund in English and represents the abstract action (*I like to read*).

*Indicative*. This corresponds to an action which someone has done, is doing, or will do (*I read the Scriptures every day*).

*Imperative*. This tells someone to do something. (Read!)

*Subjunctive*. English has all but lost its subjunctive. This is used to indicate that the verb indicates an unreal or potential possibility (*If I were a rich man, I would read more.*)

*Optative*. English has no optative. This is used to indicate a desired result. (*God forbid!*).

The main tenses for a Greek verb are:

*Present.* Something is going on right now (*I am reading.*) Greek authors frequently use a historical present, where a story is narrated using the present tense to make it more vivid. (*Laman and Lemuel start to murmur when Nephi tells them to help.*)

*Imperfect.* Something happened over a period of time or more than once in the past. (*I read the Book of Mormon every day when I was a missionary.*)

*Aorist.* Something happened (once) in the past. (*I was baptized when I turned eight [and don't need to do it again].*)

*Perfect.* Something happened in the past but is still effective in the present. (*I moved to Salt Lake two years ago [and still live there].*)

*Pluperfect.* Something happened in the past before something else. (*I had read the Book of Mormon before I went on a mission.*)

*Future.* Something will happen in the future. (*I will read the talk when it's published in the Ensign.*)

There are three voices for a Greek verb.

*Active.* The subject is doing the action. (*I read the Book of Mormon.*)

*Passive.* The action is being done to the subject. (*The Book of Mormon is read by millions.*)

*Middle.* The middle voice corresponds to nothing in English. The middle is used, as a rule, when the subject both *does* and *benefits from* the action of the verb. The simplest case is something rather like a reflexive verb in French or Spanish: *I shave myself*. In Greek, one would use the middle voice in such a case.

*Person* indicates the relationship between the speaker and the subject of the verb. Greek has the same three persons as English: first (I, we; the speaker is the subject), second (thou, you; the listener is the subject), and third (he, she, it, they; someone or something else is the subject).

*Number* matches the number of the subject, and as such is either singular (the subject is singular) or plural (the subject is plural). Homeric Greek also has a dual number.

Note that pronouns are generally omitted in Greek when they are the subject of the sentence; their presence is implied by the verb. This is like some modern languages such as Spanish. When a pronoun is explicitly present, it generally means that it is being emphasized (*λέγεις legeis* means “You’re talking,” but *σὺ λέγεις su legeis* means “You’re the one talking [as opposed to someone else],” or even “So you say.”) This is particularly important in John’s Gospel, where Jesus repeatedly says *ἐγὼ εἰμι egō eimi* with the pronoun. This has been taken as providing, in at least some cases, a verbal link with the divine title of I AM used in the theophany at the burning bush in Exodus; Jesus could be claiming to be the God of the Old Testament.

Finding the stem of a Greek verb can sometimes be difficult. Unlike most modern European languages, where only verb endings need to be taken into account, in Greek, there may be changes at *both* ends of the stem, thus: *λύω luō*, I release (present); *ἔλυσα elusa*, I released (aorist); *ἔλυκα leluka*, I have released (perfect). Greek will also frequently add a preposition to a verb stem to form a new verb with a slightly nuanced meaning, thus: *στέλλω, stellō*, I send; *ἀποστέλλω apostellō* (= *ἀπό apo*, out + *στέλλω, stellō*, I send), I dispatch. Any changes to the stem will come between the stem and the preposition(s). The preposition will frequently interact phonetically with whatever follows it. Thus, *ἐπί epi*, “upon” when followed by a rough breathing will change to *ἐφ-*.

To get a stem from an inflected form, therefore, one must undo any phonetic changes, and then isolate prepositions, verbal prefixes, the verbal stem, and verbal suffixes (and allow for irregular verbs). For the bulk of Greek verbs, this is relatively straightforward, but for some pathological cases, even an experienced student of Greek may need more than one try to get it right.

## References

Interest in New Testament Greek among Christians in general and conservative Christians in particular is such that there are countless excellent resources available for learning the basics of the language. Probably the best place to start would be at one's local public library or Christian bookstore. One example of such a resource would be William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek: Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). The standard comprehensive grammar of classical Greek, which is also useful for New Testament Greek, is Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956). If one has access to the Internet, there are free resources available that provide basic lessons in biblical Greek; an example is at <http://www.ibiblio.org/koine/>. There is also a b-greek mailing list, which is geared more for pastors and advanced students but which can be an excellent place to learn a great deal about the subtle nuances of the language (for information, see <http://www.ibiblio.org/bgreek/>).

One useful reference is Fritz Rienecker's *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), particularly for those with limited Greek. This provides verse-by-verse grammatical analyses of many of the words in the Greek New Testament, although from a decidedly conservative and occasionally limited perspective.

The standard lexicon (or dictionary) of New Testament Greek is Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), which is commonly referred to as "BDAG" from the names of the book's editors over time (Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich). The Liddell-Scott Lexicon of Classical Greek is available on the Internet at the Perseus site, located at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/resolveform>.