

**READING AND PRONOUNCING  
BIBLICAL  
GREEK**

**Vol. I**

**Historical Evidence of  
Authentic Sounds**

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**Reference**

*Excerpts from  
the introductory pages  
of the book*

**Philemon Zachariou, Ph.D.**

*Reading and Pronouncing Biblical Greek, Vol. I:  
Historical Evidence of Authentic Sounds*

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GREEK LANGUAGE & LINGUISTICS

ISBN 978-1-4507-5492-7

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Philemon Zachariou graduated from high school in Greece and from a Bible school in England, and holds a B.A. and M.A. in applied linguistics and a Ph.D. in religious education. Retired, he writes and teaches Greek and English. During most of his career as an educator and public school administrator he taught, among other college subjects, Greek at California State University, the Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Adult Education, and Capital Bible College. He is currently adjunct professor of English at Northwest University and New Testament Greek proctor for Bible Mesh Institute.

## Why This Book

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### **Reading and Pronouncing Biblical Greek**

addresses the oft-asked questions:

- How was “Koine” Greek pronounced in New Testament times?
- How similar is the pronunciation of Modern Greek to the Koine of the New Testament?
- How similar are the sounds of Koine and Attic Greek?
- Why is Erasmian so prevalent? Is it imitative of Attic Greek?

To that end, it traces the origins of Koine sounds to classical and pre-classical times and follows their development so diachronic comparisons can be made; and it describes the origins and spread of Erasmian and assesses its effects on Greek scholarship and learning.

The last chapter describes the Greek sounds, while the appendices examine Attic inscriptions at the Epigraphic Museum in Athens as presented in a special publication by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**TO MY STUDENTS** at Capital Bible College (later Northwest University) I express my gratitude for their enthusiasm about learning Greek and their excitement about seeing this work taking shape before their very eyes as their questions, discoveries, comments, and corrections kept driving me back to the drafting table for adjustments.

I am grateful to Dr. Gus Plessas, Professor Emeritus at California State University, whose early assessment of the manuscript, combined with his passion for the Greek language, served as a reassuring compass.

Many thanks also, for an invaluable perusal of the manuscript, to Rev. Dr. Joseph Kostelnik, a lover of Greek.

A word of appreciation is due in memory of the late Dr. Clayton K. Harrop, Chair of the Greek Department at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, California, whose first words in inviting me to teach New Testament Greek for the seminary were, “Here we teach the Modern Greek way,” as the pronunciation key in his New Testament Greek manual attests.

I am immensely indebted to Dr. Chrys C. Caragounis, Professor of New Testament Exegesis at Lund University, Sweden, for examining and critiquing most generously, expeditiously, and unreservedly vital portions of the manuscript. His astounding knowledge of Greek, voluminous works, and profound linguistic and Biblical insights can only be matched by his love for his mother tongue.

I am no less indebted to Dr. George Gunn, Professor of New Testament Greek at Shasta Bible College and Graduate School, for his insightful comments without which vital areas of this book would be found wanting.

Likewise, many thanks to Dr. Santi Carbonell of Universidad de Alicante, Spain, whose valuable comments in the earlier stages of the manuscript determined the depth and breadth of some areas presented.

Words of deep appreciation go to Dr. Bradley H. McLean, Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Knox College, University of Toronto, Canada, for an incisive evaluation of the manuscript that helped sharpen the focus of the project.

Words of appreciation go as well to Dr. Nikolaos Adamou of Holy Trinity Seminary, New York, whose diagnostic remarks helped bring this project’s goal into clearer view.

I wish to express my gratitude also to Dr. Harvey C. Pittman, Professor of Greek and Academic Dean at International Seminary, Florida, for his intense involvement in examining the manuscript and for his excitement about seeing this book and the workbook in the hands of many students.

I am particularly indebted to Rev. Dr. David S. Hasselbrook, Pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church, Missoula, Montana, for graciously devoting time to examining the final version of the book and for affirming the worthiness of its purpose.

Many thanks as well to Dr. Jody A. Barnard, Professor of New Testament Greek in the United Kingdom, for his thorough examination of this book, which resulted in a number of vital corrections and in the addition of valuable points of discussion.

—Philemon Zachariou



## PRONUNCIATION MATTERS

**N**EW TESTAMENT GREEK textbooks typically devote a page or two to some Erasmian pronunciation key. While different authors at times share some of the same examples in their keys, their description of Greek sounds often varies. As a matter of fact, at times one author's description of a given vowel may fit the description of a different vowel in another author's key. Such pronunciation inconsistencies speak of the need for some uniform approach to reading and pronouncing New Testament Greek.

The need for such an approach, however, remains a moot issue in the vast majority of theological institutions and universities in America and abroad where Erasmian is used. Brilliant scholars who are somewhat or even appreciably familiar with the historical development of Greek sounds, yet overshadowed by formative training, typically see no issue with the particular manner in which they teach their students to read and pronounce Greek. Consequently, many deem it unnecessary, if not collegiately inexpedient, to adopt the consistent pronunciation of Neohellenic (Modern Greek). After all, today's Greek spelling and sounds are a modern development, whereas Erasmian is imitative of the idealized pronunciation of Classical Greek—or so these scholars have been led to think.

This study describes the historical sounds of Greek and the graphemes that represent them and shows that these sounds are preserved in mainstream Neohellenic. Ample evidence in the light of historical research indicates that these sounds can be traced to the papyrial and inscriptional record of the Hellenistic period and to their origin in classical or pre-classical times.

To that end, I have incorporated works by native Greek scholars as well as non-Greek scholars in order to bring an added dimension to your understanding of the historical development of the Hellenic language in general and of its phonology in specific. I have also incorporated references to works by Erasmian advocates and adherents in order to not only spotlight their treatment of the historical evidence, but also to create an awareness of the main ramifications of that treatment.

A number of questions may have by now been raised in your mind. It is hoped that the essence of your questions is reflected in the "Questions" section that follows, as this work considers such questions legitimate and fair and devotes its beginning chapters to substantiating the answers.

## QUESTIONS

The following questions come under the focal questions on page v.

### GREEK PRONUNCIATION

- After two millennia since Christ, doesn't Neohellenic sound as different from the Κοινή *Koine* of Biblical Greek as, say, Modern English from Chaucer's Anglo-Saxon?
- If we had evidence that Κοινή sounded much like Neohellenic, what might that evidence be?
- Even if Κοινή sounded much like Neohellenic, isn't today's Greek spelling, syllabification, and reading different from that of Biblical Greek, which would complicate matters for English-speaking instructors and students?
- Are there any Bible colleges or seminaries that teach Κοινή Greek not the Erasmian way but the way Greek is pronounced today? If so, what is their reasoning?

### ERASMIAN PRONUNCIATION

- If Erasmian has been the preferred pronunciation in universities and theological institutions for five centuries now, is it not because Κοινή, like Attic Greek, is a dead language and therefore unrelated to today's Greek?
- Why change the way Greek has been traditionally taught in our universities, Bible colleges, and seminaries, since professors of Greek are all in unity regarding the Erasmian way Κοινή is pronounced?
- Scholars of Greek advocate the use of Erasmian in an attempt to approximate that melodious Attic Greek of classical Athens—the speech of Plato and Aristotle. Isn't that the ideal pronunciation for our Bible and Ancient Greek students today?

Could you elucidate?

Answer: Certainly. Please read on ...

*“The [Greek] pronunciation commonly used in American colleges and seminaries is an attempt to approximate that used by the Athenians during the classical period of Greece (fifth and fourth centuries B.C.).”*

**T**HIS ASSERTION by a New Testament Greek scholar (discussed later) is in reference to the so-called “theoretical,” “academic,” or “standard” pronunciation of Greek. Invented in the early 1500s, this pronunciation is credited to the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus, so it is commonly known also as Erasmian. The Erasmian pronunciation supposedly approximates the way Plato and Aristotle spoke Greek in classical Athens. As it will be shown in this study, however, Erasmian is artificial and inconsistent and has never been a part of the Greek speech.<sup>1</sup>

In Erasmus’ day, while the Greek national voice remained silenced by the Ottoman Turks after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, unprecedented international interest in Classical Greek and in the newly printed Greek New Testament led non-Greek Renaissance intelligentsia to lump together everything Greek from antiquity down to the Christian era under one label: *Ancient Greek*. In other words, Erasmus had no reason to distinguish between the pronunciation of Aristotle’s Attic Greek and Paul’s Κοινή, for they both spoke “Ancient Greek.”

Unlike Erasmus himself, however, Erasmian adherents today view the pronunciation of New Testament Κοινή as being different from that of Classical Greek due to phonological changes they presume Greek underwent before New Testament times as a result of Alexander’s spread of Κοινή; yet they indiscriminately apply Erasmian to Classical Greek and New Testament Greek alike. Seen in this light, what the above assertion essentially says is that Aristotle’s Erasmian pronunciation of Classical Greek is a more appropriate model for New Testament Greek than Paul’s own pronunciation of Κοινή.

This implication raises questions about the pervasive presence of Erasmian—and in recent years, of other quasi-Erasmian varieties of pronunciation—in the study of Biblical and Classical Greek. Close inquiry reveals that Erasmian is much more than just a pronunciation issue. Therefore the move being made in this study for the pronunciation warranted by the historical record eventually transcends the very question of pronunciation itself and elicits attention as well to other aspects of the Greek language and learning that are impacted by Erasmian and which as a result are currently at stake.

But let us now bring temporary closure to the above foretaste of the Erasmian issue and resume the topic in Chapter 4, that is, after a discussion of the historical background of the Greek language, the formation of Κοινή, and the development of the historical Greek sounds.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Erasmian* as used here encompasses all Erasmian-like pronunciations of Greek.

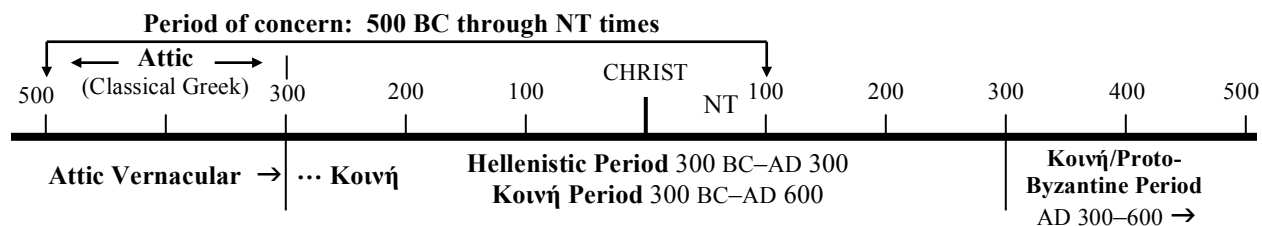


— CHAPTER 2 —

## THE PHONOLOGY OF Κοινή: DEVELOPMENT AND SIMILARITIES TO NEOHELLENIC

### 2.1 A specific linguistic period

The Attic Greek vernacular did not die nor did it give birth to a new language;<sup>2</sup> rather, it continued to develop through Hellenistic and Byzantine times down to the present day. From Alexander the Great until technically AD 600, Greek is known as Κοινή *Koine* [kiní], and from then on as Neohellenic Κοινή or simply *Neohellenic* (1.2, 1.9). This chapter examines the development of the phonology of Κοινή and compares it with that of Neohellenic. Because certain features of Κοινή phonology had already been established by or initiated within classical times, reference will be made as well to their period of origin or initiation. Of immediate concern then becomes the time period from classical through NT times, as the diagram below shows:



### 2.2 Iotacism

English-speaking students of NT and Classical Greek are normally told that in Neohellenic the [i] sound is represented six different ways: ι, η, υ, ει, οι, υι; and that this “modern” Greek method of pronouncing these letters and digraphs began to develop around Medieval times. This method, students are further told, could not have been true of Classical Greek as there was no reason for the Athenians, a people of the subtlest intellect, to have assigned the same phonetic value to such a variety of symbols.<sup>3</sup> As it will be shown, however, this variety of spellings for the same sound—that of ἰῶτα *iota* (ι)—is not a modern invention but rather the result of a centuries-old linguistic progression that reached classical Athens.

<sup>2</sup> Wallace’s analogy of a physical but not linguistic birth of Κοινή in 330 BC can be misleading: “Just as a newborn baby does not immediately speak, it took some time before Koine took shape.” Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 18. Such descriptions, regardless of intent, can lead to the erroneous notion that Κοινή was an “infant” tongue, not the continuation of an existing language.

<sup>3</sup> Notably, English i-sounds are spelled 30 different ways (5.7).

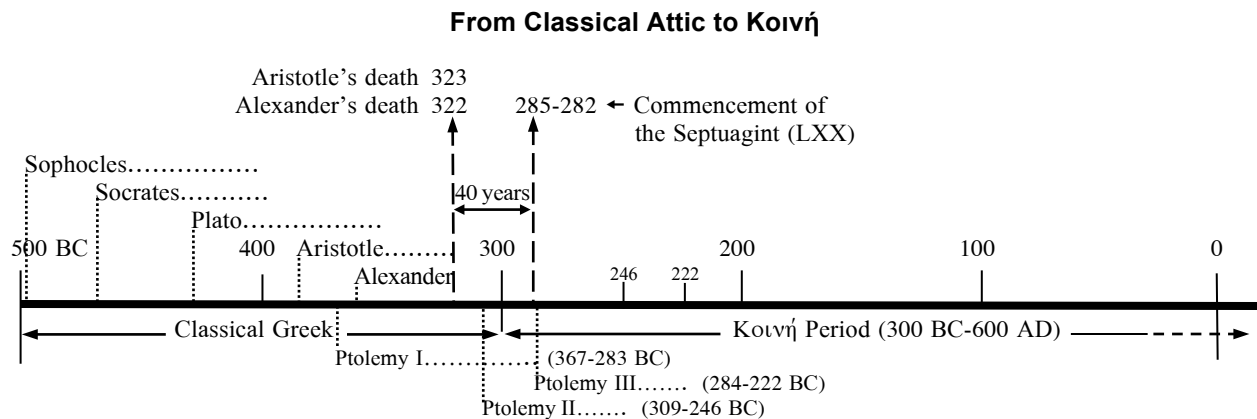
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### 3.4 From Septuagint to New Testament

As already seen, the translation of the Septuagint, initially the Pentateuch, commenced around 285 BC (1.5), while the original NT writings were all completed by the end of the first century. However one slices the pie, the Κοινή of the Septuagint and the Κοινή of the New Testament are one and the same language and share one and the same writing and orthographic system, the post-Eucleidean. Distinctions such as “Egyptian Greek,” “Alexandrian Koine,” “Jewish Koine,” or “Christian Greek” regarding Κοινή are nothing more than fanciful names, dear though they are to grammarians, lexicographers and exegetes. Besides, our premise concerns the mainstream Κοινή phonology, not arbitrary descriptions of Κοινή or isolated peculiarities of any Κοινή expression.

**How different were the Κοινή sounds of the Septuagint translators from Aristotle’s Classical Attic sounds?**

Our premise then triggers the question: Since the Septuagint and the New Testament were written in Κοινή, and while the Κοινή sounds were supposedly different from the Attic Greek sounds of classical Athens, how different were the Κοινή sounds of the Septuagint translators in 285 BC from Alexander and Aristotle’s Attic Greek sounds in 325 BC, or about 40 years earlier? The chart below is meant to add some visual perspective to this question and its answer:



As the above chart shows, Alexander and his private tutor, Aristotle, died within a year of each other, their death coinciding with the close of the classical period (500-300 BC) and the beginning of the Hellenistic (300 BC-300 AD). If Aristotle’s Attic was now to turn into the Κοινή of the Septuagint, there was barely a 40-year window between his death and the commencement of the translation of the Septuagint in order for classical η, η, υ, ει, οι, υι to be read as ι [i], αι as ε [e], α as α [a], ω and ω as ο [o]; for φ, θ, χ, β, δ, γ and the υ of αυ ευ ηυ to become fricativized; for aspirate [h] to go into disuse; for

biphthongal ζ [dz]/[zd] to turn into monophthongal [z]; for the long-short vowel distinction to disappear; and for the tonal features of the language to give way to stress.<sup>4</sup>

Such preposterous notions laid aside, it is highly likely that at least some of the seventy-two Jewish emissaries assigned to the task of translating the Hebrew Scriptures into Κοινή were old enough to have been educated in Greek even while Aristotle was still alive.<sup>5</sup> These Jews therefore spoke Κοινή using the historical sounds of Attic Greek as did Aristotle, Alexander, and the Ptolemies, and wrote according to the same standardized post-Eucleidean orthography of contemporary Athens—irrespective of whether or not any of them spoke flawless Athenian or with some Semitic accent.

From the very outset these erudite men knew, for instance, that ευ was not [ju] as in *feud* but fricativized [ev] as in Λευιτικόν [levitikón] *Leviticus*; and that αυ was not [aʊ] as in *sauerkraut* but [av] as in Δαυίδ [ðavíð] *David*. For by then the processes of fricativization and other linguistic changes, such as already discussed, had long been in place by classical times, with the Attic Greek vernacular and its HGP sounds and orthography entering the Κοινή period in their definitive form.

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<sup>4</sup> If so, the Κοινή of Ptolemy III, king of Egypt, would have sounded nearly unintelligible to his grandfather, Ptolemy I, one of Alexander's generals and for 44 years a contemporary of Aristotle, also a contemporary of the Jewish translators; and, alas, the Κοινή of Atticist Dionysios Thrax (170–90 BC), like a foreign tongue.

<sup>5</sup> As the diagram shows, Sophocles died at age 90, Plato at 82, Aristotle at 62. The average lifespan of these men, including Socrates' premature death at 70, was 76 years, a high average even by modern standards. Though the natural lifespan average in classical Athens was probably lower, it was not unusual for a person born in that period, whether in Athens, Rome, Jerusalem, Alexandria, or elsewhere, to live well past the age of 70. In that the translation of the Septuagint began in Alexandria around 285 BC or earlier, that is, within 40 years of Aristotle's death, it follows that any of the Septuagint translators enjoying a higher lifespan were educated in Greek when Aristotle was still living, while the younger ones were educated by teachers who had been contemporaries of Aristotle. In either case, the Greek speech sounds of those emissaries were the HGP sounds of Aristotle's day. And while parts of the Septuagint were completed in later years, they were written in the same Κοινή, also the Κοινή of the New Testament.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Excerpt from  
the last pages

Chapter 1 gives a historical overview of the development of the Hellenic language into the dimorphic (artistic and vernacular) Attic dialect of Athens. Following Alexander, the Attic vernacular spreads throughout the Hellenized world and becomes the Κοινή “common” speech of Hellenistic and Roman times, and further evolves through Byzantine times into today’s Neohellenic.

Chapter 2 shows that Hellenistic papyri yield evidence of the Koine sounds through an unbroken record of repeated spelling errors by individuals inadequately acquainted with Greek orthography and who as a result confuse graphemes that stand for the same sound. Such errors are traced back to Athens’ Golden Age, when older Attic writing begins to clash with Athens’ newly adopted Ionic script, *the post-Eucleidean* grammar, an alphabet shared as well by Koine and Neohellenic alike. In the ensuing confusion, iotacism emerges as a primary cause for misspellings that will be seen repeated through Hellenistic, Byzantine, and modern-day writings. The phonological and orthographical features Koine and Neohellenic share, all established by or initiated within classical times, form the basis for the *Historical Greek Pronunciation* (HGP).

Chapter 3 focuses on the emergence of the HGP. Formed by or initiated within classical times, the HGP sounds make their entrance into the Hellenistic era, loyal post-Eucleidean orthography by their side. Barely four decades past Aristotle’s death, 72 Jewish emissaries steeped in a Κοινή molded by the HGP and the orthography of Aristotle’s day commence their translation of Hebrew Scriptures. Paul’s speech to the Athenians some three centuries later speaks of Κοινή’s tenacious HGP, the mainstream Greek sound system that prevails through Hellenistic and Byzantine times over all other potential pronunciations of Greek.

Chapter 4 discusses the politically orchestrated origins and spread of Erasmian in the 1500s and shows that as a pronunciation system, Erasmian is artificial and inconsistent, whereas the Greek pronunciation is natural, consistent, and euphonic.

Chapter 5 refutes two misconceptions: reading and pronouncing the ι-sound Greek letters and digraphs—in what is erroneously thought to be) the Neohellenic way presents difficulties for English-speaking students; and Κοινή and Neohellenic words are dissimilar. A comparison of Greek and English phonemes and alphabets demonstrates that the English way of spelling, reading, and pronouncing is much more complex for learners of English than the Greek way is for English-speaking students, thereby rendering the concern of difficulty in language learning pointless. The chapter moreover shows that a high percentage of the NT vocabulary is used or understood by speakers of Neohellenic.

Chapter 6 critiques the far-fetched extent to which Erasmian scholars go in applying English phonological concepts to Attic Greek and Κοινή alike. As a case in point, the chapter analyzes the description of the pronunciation of Classical Greek by two Erasmian scholars, one being Sidney Allen, author of *Vox Graeca*, and shows that the Erasmian pronunciation of Classical Greek, which Erasmians apply to Hellenistic Koine as well, is untenable.

Chapter 7 describes Erasmian as the barrier that for five centuries now has inhibited viewing the Greek language holistically and diachronically, therewith preventing the light

of the later Greek from illuminating exegetically the Greek NT texts. This barrier is sustained by leading Erasmian advocates operating in accountability-free scholastic environments with respect to the pronunciation of Greek. The chapter shows that Neohellenic can shed light on NT usage, exegesis, and textual transmission; and that the application of the HGP can serve as the remedial force that may eventually cancel out the Erasmian effects on Greek scholarship.

Chapter 8 offers tips on key differences between Greek and English phonologies, points out the features most crucial in pronouncing Greek, and summarily describes the features of the Greek phonemic sounds.

Annotated Attic decrees from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> c. BC in the appendices lend added support to the basic premise in this work regarding Greek sounds: that the repeated misspellings seen in Hellenistic, Byzantine, and modern-day writings are traced to Attic Greek; and that such errors, judged diachronically by the same alphabet and orthography, are the strongest proof of the historical Greek sounds and their preservation in Neohellenic.

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## THE HGP TODAY

**T**ODAY THE HISTORICAL GREEK PRONUNCIATION (HGP) is moving forward in strides as an increasing number of scholars and students around the world advance its application even while favoring greater familiarity with Neohellenic. It is hoped that the HGP will eventually be viewed by the majority as a step in the right direction, a departure from the confines of the Erasmian dichotomy of Greek and the grip of its anachronistic tradition, and into a linguistically sound approach to Hellenic studies. This could only invigorate interest in the Greek language and literature, lead to deeper New Testament insights, cultivate close articulation and academic commerce with the Greek-speaking world, and engender greater appreciation for the millennia-old authentic sounds of the Hellenic tongue.

It is also hoped that some parts in this book will seize the interest of students and scholars who might take the HGP to new heights of linguistic competence throughout the non-Greek-speaking world, thereby vindicating the tongue whose 400 years of silence during captivity, and for nearly half that number of years since, created a vacuum in countless centers of Hellenic learning around the world only to be filled with discordant sounds supposedly imitative of her genuine voice.

(Cont'd)



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App. B

CHANGES IN ATTIC WRITING

App. C

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF THE CHANGES  
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(End of excerpts)