

Reviving Historical Greek

**The conversational Greek primer
for students of the New Testament and Classics**

John Schwandt

This manuscript is evaluation draft #19 for use by students at New St. Andrews College and selected other schools and individuals in the 2005 school year only. Reproduction is granted only by express permission of the author. No other use or reproduction of this manuscript is permitted.

All Rights Reserved 2001

INTRODUCTION

The Distinctiveness of This Grammar

Greek is not a dead language—

The Greek language has existed for thousands of years. Homer wrote his epics nearly three thousand years ago and the same language is still in use. Yes, the language has morphed over time but not sufficiently to say that Homer used a different language than what we find in Greece today. However, the differences between Classical, Biblical, and Modern Greek have been so vastly overstated that most people don't hesitate to call Classical or Biblical Greek a "dead language." Yes, Greeks in this generation find the older material of the New Testament and classics difficult to read, but they only need a brief course to point out the differences in grammar to gain fluency. It is not as if they have to learn a new language. They merely have to familiarize themselves with the grammatical style of the older form of their own language. The task doesn't compare with what an Italian must do when learning Latin.

The differences between Modern and Classical Greek are as significant as the spelling and vocabulary changes that have occurred in English since the Elizabethan era. We do not classify Elizabethan English as a dead language. Even though there are no new Elizabethan forms and vocabulary being produced, this doesn't constitute a valid reason for calling Elizabethan English dead. If it did, then we would also have to pronounce 19th and 20th century English dead. At most, Elizabethan English is a dead dialect, which would also be an appropriate classification of Classical Greek. But as for the language, it has been kicking for nearly three thousand years and our Lord has seen fit to

Definition *Dead Language*

A good litmus test for determining if a language is dead (i.e., no longer in use) would be to imagine if a person from that time could communicate today. For example an Old English speaker could not communicate today (and vice-versa) so Old English would be a dead language. However, if Paul or Plato found themselves in Modern day Athens they would be able to understand the language while enjoying the Acropolis. If a Modern Greek were transported back to Biblical times he would have a more difficult time but would still recognize and understand

preserve it to this day. Therefore our task is not to resurrect or recreate the Greek language. We simply need to *revive* our study, knowledge and use of it.

Not Biblical or Classical, but Historical —

Definition Terms of Dialects

The terms used for the various Greek Dialects can overlap and be confusing.

Here is a brief summary:

800 B.C. (Homer):

Ancient Greek
Homeric Greek
Ionic Greek

Others Depending on

Location:

Doric Greek
Acadian Greek
Attic Greek

Prior to 200 B.C.

Ancient Greek
Attic Greek
Classical Greek

Prior to 500 A.D.

Ancient Greek
Biblical Greek
Koine
Byzantine Greek
Kathourevousa

Post 500 A.D.

Modern Greek
Demotike

Of course, it is all Greek to me.

Most recent Biblical Greek texts teach only enough Greek for someone to engage the language of the New Testament. In doing so, they treat Classical Greek as if it were a separate and dead language that would require a series of additional classes to learn. They downplay the benefits of Classical Greek for truly understanding Biblical Greek and treat it as if it were basically irrelevant for learning the language of the New Testament. However, the same cannot be said of classicists. It should seem strange that those who learn Classical Greek can read Biblical Greek, but those who take the same number of courses in Biblical Greek cannot read Classical Greek. This raises the question of how well students of Biblical Greek know Greek if their proficiency in Greek is limited only to the familiar New Testament scriptures.

However, my impression is that much of this discrepancy is merely psychological. Even though the differences between Biblical and Classical Greek are less significant than the differences between the writings of Plato and Homer, contemporary Biblical Greek curricula have unwittingly constructed an artificial barrier between Classical and Biblical Greek. Biblical Greek curricula go to significant lengths to only include readings from the New Testament. This gives Biblical Greek students the false impression that Classical Greek is incomprehensible to them. Further they never learn common extra-biblical vocabulary words, which confirms their expectation if they ever try to read some classical Greek.

The fact is that the two dialects are so similar that greater care should be made when distinguishing them than comparing them. This is where our terminology also works against us. So often, we create the impression of a great difference by using the qualifiers “Biblical” and “Classical” to make a distinction without a contextual difference. Perhaps in such general situations it would be better to refer to Ancient

or Historical Greek (in contrast to Modern). This may help encourage students of the New Testament to broaden and deepen their Greek understanding by reading unfamiliar Greek outside of the New Testament. Besides, if a student goes to all of the effort to learn such difficult language as Historical Greek, shouldn't he reap all of the rewards of being able to read the great classics as well as the New Testament? Of course, no student should expect to read every ancient author fluently after a couple years of study. -- After all, the study of Greek is a life sport, like golf.-- But he should have the skills, encouragement and freedom to gain a familiarity with whatever ancient Greek author he chooses. For that reason, this text teaches Ancient Greek and only makes a distinction between Biblical and Classical Greek when there is a difference.

Tip

The study of Greek is a life sport like golf. Mastery doesn't come instantly. But if you allow yourself to enjoy the rewards of your progress, you may find the pursuit is satisfying and possibly addictive.

Practical Benefits of Historical Greek—

There are many benefits of learning Historical Greek, which is a broader study than merely the words contained in the New Testament. Historical Greek had a tremendous vocabulary which offers many benefits that are not available with texts that limit the vocabulary to common words in the New Testament.

1. There is a better palette of vocabulary, which makes basic readings more enjoyable.
2. Students are not distracted by the possible doctrines of biblical sounding practice sentences.
3. There is a greater abundance of vocabulary with English derivatives.
4. Students get a better feel for how to look for vocabulary roots to enable educated guess with unfamiliar vocabulary and learn words that occur infrequently in the New Testament more readily.

In addition to these vocabulary benefits, learning Classical Greek gives Biblical Greek students a better understanding of tendencies of the

language as it changes over time. This is apparent in the area of morphology (spelling). In the New Testament there are many verbs that don't display all of their forms. Most texts leave these extra-biblical forms out and students don't get to see the patterns of spelling changes as easily. Further, students of Historical Greek must learn some variant spellings of verbs as they were manifested differently over time. Again, this helps to explain the logic behind some apparently irregular forms in New Testament Greek.

Learning Ancient Greek also gives students of the New Testament a better understanding of grammar. This is especially true of non-indicative verbs. Just as vocabulary and spelling changes over time so does grammar. Students can better understand the grammar of a particular text if they know the trajectory of the changes that surround it.

Often students who only translate passages of the New Testament end up relying on their knowledge of their English Bible to translate. We must use context to understand difficult passages, but when students already know what a text should say they don't learn how to use the various elements of context to decipher unfamiliar and difficult passages. Student must learn how to translate foreign passages in order to learn a foreign language.

The reasons seminaries and religious institutions began to focus on Biblical Greek exclusively was the concern that learning extra information that is not contained in the New Testament was too difficult and superfluous. This argument has been taken to such an extreme that many seminaries now no longer even teach the language of the New Testament and only offer a class or two showing how to use language tools. But we now know from the language skills of classics students that learning Historical Greek is not too hard and it offers essential benefits to avoid a truncated understanding of the language.

Why the focus on the New Testament—

In addition to translating the New Testament into the common language of the people, Martin Luther argued that the leaders in the

Church should not shame her by refusing to learn the language of the scriptures. Not only did he argue for broad access to the scriptures through common translations, but also he argued that a good percentage of the Church should be fluent with the originals for a check and balance to ensure the strength and solidarity of the church. In these two ways he sought to free the scriptures from its bondage in Latin. These were radical ideas, which precipitated massive reform. Today the bible is translated in nearly every language on earth, and in some languages like English, producing new translations has become an industry.

We have achieved Luther's first concern and have ignored his second so well that the Word of God faces captivity once again. Today, it is difficult to find a church where anyone including the pastor can read the New Testament in the original. Exegesis from the original is isolated to a scholarly elect and anything can pass in a sermon as long as it is prefaced by the incantation "In the original it says..." Further, those who wish to pursue original language study are warned that it is too dangerous for them to start dabbling in Greek. This is the same argument for exclusivity that Luther opposed.

Our task is more difficult than finding someone to translate the New Testament into the language of the masses. In order to ensure free access to the original language of our scriptures a noticeable percentage of the Church must learn Ancient Greek.

It is time for the Church to throw off its troubling dependence upon lexicons and *ispe dixit* appeals to a select group of scholars and commentators in Greek. It is time for the church as a whole to grow up and give the Word of God the respect it deserves. This means not settling for translations, which necessarily involve interpretation. One can trace the proliferation of diverse doctrines and the detachment of the church from *sola scriptura* in the 20th century to the waning interest and study of the Greek language by the Church. It is time to repent and change course. Since this battle was lost in the classrooms of colleges and seminaries, the tide of the war can be turned back in the classroom. Hopefully, very young students will eventually be taught to speak, read and sing the Greek scriptures. I am convinced that when the Word of

Definition

Ispe dixit is Latin meaning "he himself said (it)" This text doesn't presume that reader knows Latin. However, once you have mastered the language of the New Testament, you will find the language of church history (Latin) relatively easy to learn. If you already know Latin, Greek is actually an easier language (it has less forms), but it is more foreign than Latin, which makes it seem more difficult.

Opinion

A vast number of the world's population regardless of intelligence or talent learns a second language for business or political reasons. How much more should a people with God's blessing be motivated to learn the languages of His revelation.

God covers the world as the waters cover the sea, so will the biblical languages.

Active Language Methods —

Most Classical Greek and Biblical Greek curricula attempt merely to teach the student to read the language. I call this passive learning since the student is only required to translate whatever biblical texts appear before him. This may be one of the quickest ways to familiarize oneself with a language, but it is the slowest way to develop fluency. Some say there is no need to achieve conversational fluency since students only need to translate quietly to themselves. I disagree. Students must achieve some level of fluency (even if it is only with basic vocabulary and grammar) to enable them to translate fast enough to enjoy using the language and maintain their skills after they graduate from the classroom. Fluency also enables readers to anticipate what is expected and notice when the author communicates in a way that is surprising or notable.

Few courses still require extensive Greek composition, where students must either translate English into Greek or compose their own Greek. Greek composition or conversation involves more active skills and contributes to a deeper and more thorough understanding of the material. The only deficiency of this type of approach is that it can (but not necessarily) seem burdensome to the students since composing is a slower process initially than merely translating. When I first decided to introduce conversational methods into my class, I thought it would retard the whole process of learning Greek since it takes more exercises to gain that level of fluency. However, I found that my class actually finished the beginning material more quickly because they didn't require as much review in the latter portions of the course.

The best way to work toward fluency in Biblical Greek is to teach it as we do other modern languages. In order to gain an immediate active command of the language students must be forced to use the language quickly in conversation where there is no time for translating every syllable. A student who knows the meaning of a sentence without having

Opinion

Radical "inductive" and "deductive" pedagogical positions misidentify the current deficiency in classical language instruction thinking it has to do with how often and overtly grammar and paradigms is presented. This fixation seems to blind their adherents to the remedy of teaching classical languages actively for conversational fluency.

to translate will be able to read quickly without the intrusion of various English words and truly enjoy whatever Greek texts come before him. Learning also becomes more enjoyable when you can study merely by talking with friends. Recently, a few texts which teach conversational Greek have been published but normally the conversational aspect only lasts for the first few chapters. This text is the first in a series which teaches *active* Biblical Greek from beginning to end.

This text uses many methods developed by ESL (English as a Second Language) programs. This often includes responsive games, dialogues and TPR (Total Physical Response) exercises. Not only does the involvement of the whole body help students understand the language more fluently and more memorably, it also is more fun and engaging than merely drilling vocabulary and translating practice sentences.

Unfortunately, I did not first learn Greek using these methods, but have been improving my facility with the language ever since I began employing these methods in the classroom. Of course I made some mistakes in front of the class when I began leading conversation in Greek, but I make mistakes in my use of English too. Hopefully, I am reducing these as I use both languages over time. Having overcome my fear of making a conversational mistake in front of a class and releasing that no great harm came of it, I'm now in a position to encourage other instructors to experiment conversationally with their classes. In deed, I have found it useful to intentionally make a mistake and then correct it as teaching technique. With nothing to lose and a more fluent command of the language to gain as well as enlivening classical language courses, I hope this text serves as a catalyst for instructors to begin using Greek in the class and even producing more conversational recourses.

Having introduced these teaching methods into my own class for only a few years, I still am at the beginning of the journey toward full conversational fluency. I'm sure that some many have suggestions on the style of some of the Greek compositions and dialogues in this text. Some of those critiques are inevitable since style can be rather subjective, but others I sure would be helpful improvements. I'm glad to receive

any such comments and will consider including such suggestion in future editions.

Pronunciation —

There are many conventions for pronouncing Biblical Greek and any of them may be used with this text. However, everyone in a class should use a consistent pronunciation system. Greek is confusing enough without having to listen for different pronunciations when you are just beginning. If this means that you have to learn a new system to match your class, consider yourself lucky. This means that you have had learned some Greek previously and have some time to learn additional pronunciation system while the rest of the class catches up to you. Further, knowing multiple pronunciation systems is beneficial for every Greek scholar. So put in the work early to learn the system which the rest of your class is using and count yourself blessed.

Conventions —

Even though this text assumes that the reader knows English well, it explains many points of English due to the recent decline of educational standards. Since Greek has a nasty reputation of being an extremely irregular language, this text spends many pages discussing the history of phonetic and morphological changes in order to demonstrate how regular the language really is. The diligent student will find this information helpful in a number of ways. Not only will it yield a sense of order and structure to the material, it will actually equip the student to handle strange forms, misspellings, and understand alternative meanings. Further, it will force the student to spend time meditating on various forms as their history is discussed. This will create a quicker and deeper familiarity with the forms when encountered, reviewed, or studied. Just as good character development is necessary to get attached to a character in a novel; historical data regarding forms will strengthen a student's connection to the forms. As a student, I always appreciated this kind of

information and my students usually enjoy the excursus into the history of forms as well.