

# *An Introduction to Biblical Greek*

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## *Introduction to Learning Biblical Greek*<sup>1</sup>

I commend you for beginning the first steps on the path toward reading one of the two most amazing and beneficial books ever written—the Greek New Testament. The value of studying the Bible in the languages in which it was written is hard to express. Martin Luther, the great reformer and master of the biblical languages, said it well when he wrote:

And let us be sure of this we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages [Greek and Hebrew]. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the [pantry] in which this food is stored; and . . . they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments. If through our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!), we shall . . . lose the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

I have been studying the languages since 2000 and since beginning to read from the text have never once asked myself, “Is it really worth all this time and work?”

Please don’t misunderstand; knowing—or even mastering—the biblical languages will not cause every interpretive problem to vanish. But, you can be confident that diligently studying the Bible from the original languages will shine much clarifying, heart-warming light on the sacred texts and open up to you a whole new realm of understanding. There is a treasure of information and understanding concealed in the *grammar* of the original language that simply cannot be mined from English translations.

As you begin this incredible journey, remember:

1. *Don’t get discouraged.* Proficiency in this language is an ongoing process (that even the “experts” are still in). One of my favorite promises of the Bible is found in Galatians 6:9: “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.” The goal is consistent progress.
2. *Stay at it.* I have a sign in my office that quotes Proverbs 14:23 in large part to keep me working to learn these languages, “In all labor there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty” (Proverbs 14:23). Remember this line: ‘A little every day will go a long way.’

Finally, let me cite some of the main sources that I will be using to compile your materials:

- S. M. Baugh, *A New Testament Greek Primer* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995).
- William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).
- William Hersey Davis, *Beginner’s Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1923).

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<sup>2</sup> From: “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” (1524).

## The Greek Alphabet

Step #1: Learn the Greek alphabet. Write each letter many, many times, pronouncing its name each time, until you can say and write the whole alphabet from memory without hesitation.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Printed Form</i>	<i>Handwritten</i>	<i>What They Sound Like in English</i>
Alpha	A α	Aα	a as in <u>f</u> ather
Beta	B β	Bβ	b as in <u>b</u> oy
Gamma	Γ γ	Γγ	g as in <u>g</u> one
Delta	Δ δ	Δδ	d as in <u>d</u> og
Epsilon	E ε	Eε	e as in <u>p</u> et
Zeta	Z ζ	Zζ	z as in <u>d</u> aze
Eta	H η	Hη	ā as in <u>l</u> ate
Theta	Θ θ	Θθ	th as in <u>th</u> ing (not <u>th</u> is)
Iota	I ι	Iι	ē as in <u>m</u> ee <u>t</u> ; i as in <u>s</u> it (notice both sounds in <u>i</u> n <u>tr</u> ig <u>u</u> e) <sup>3</sup>
Kappa	K κ	Kκ	k as in <u>k</u> ite
Lambda	Λ λ	Λλ	l as in <u>l</u> amb
Mu	M μ	Mμ	m as in <u>m</u> other
Nu	N ν	Nν	n as in <u>n</u> ew
Xi	Ξ ξ	Ξξ	x as in <u>l</u> ax
Omicron	O ο	Oο	o as in <u>n</u> ot
Pi	Π π	Ππ	p as in <u>p</u> ie
Rho	P ρ	Pρ	r as in <u>r</u> ow
Sigma	Σ σ Final - ς	Σσς	s as in <u>s</u> it
Tau	T τ	Tτ	t as in <u>t</u> owel
Upsilon	Υ υ	Υυ	oo as in <u>h</u> oop
Phi	Φ φ	Φφ	ph as in <u>p</u> hone
Chi	X χ	Xχ	ch as in <u>ch</u> asm or <u>l</u> och (not <u>ch</u> ick)
Psi	Ψ ψ	Ψψ	ps as in <u>o</u> ops
Omega	Ω ω	Ωω	ō as in <u>n</u> ote

<sup>3</sup> When accented or when followed by two consonants, use the long ē sound; otherwise use the short i sound.

**Printed Form**

ΑΒΓΔΕΖΗΘΙΚΛΜΝΞΟΠΡΣΤΥΦΧΨΩ  
 αβγδεζηθικλμνξοπρσςτυφχψω

Αα Ββ Γγ Δδ Εε Ζζ Ηη Θθ  
 Ιι Κκ Λλ Μμ Νν Ξξ Οο Ππ  
 Ρρ Σσς Ττ Υυ  
 Φφ Χχ Ψψ Ωω

**Handwritten Form**

Αα Ββ Γγ Δδ Εε Ζζ Ηη Θθ  
 Ιι Κκ Λλ Μμ Νν Ξξ Οο Ππ  
 Ρρ Σσς Ττ Υυ  
 Φφ Χχ Ψψ Ωω

## *Greek Vowels*<sup>4</sup>

The Greek language has seven vowels: Αα Εε Ηη Ιι Οο Υυ Ωω. They can have “long” or “short” values depending on the amount of time required to say the vowels.

ε and ο are always **short**.  
 η and ω are always **long**.  
 α, ι, and υ can be **either** long or short.

When vowels lengthen, here is the pattern they follow:

α ↗ α (There are two possibilities).  
 ↘ η  
 ε → η  
 ι → ι  
 ο → ω  
 υ → υ

## *Use of Capital Letters*

When the books and letters of the Greek New Testament were originally written, Greek was written in all capital letters, without spaces between words, and without punctuation. For example, Romans 5:1 would have looked something like this:

ΔΙΚΑΙΩΘΕΝΤΕΣΟΥΝΕΚΠΙΣΤΕΩΣΕΙΡΗΝΗΝΕΧΟΜΕΝΠΡΟΣΤΟΝΘΕΟΝΔΙΑΤΟΥΚΥΡΙΟΥ  
 ΗΜΩΝΙΗΣΟΥΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ<sup>5</sup>

Thankfully, modern editions of the Greek New Testament make the text much easier for us to read. Here is Romans 5:1 as it appears in the UBS4 edition of the Greek New Testament:<sup>6</sup>

Δικαιωθέντες οὖν ἐκ πίστεως εἰρήνην ἔχομεν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ  
 Χριστοῦ

As you can see, most of the words are written with lower case letters. Now, the only time capital letters are used in Greek is to:

- **Begin proper names** (notice the capitals used at the beginning of Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ above)
- **Begin paragraphs** (the capital Δ at the beginning of Romans 5:1 shows us that the editors of the UBS4 believe that Romans 5:1 begins a new paragraph).
- **Begin direct quotations**

<sup>4</sup> Don't worry about memorizing this section. Make a mental note of it, and we will refer back to it in months to come.

<sup>5</sup> Before you think, “There is no way that somebody can read that!” let me try it on you. Can you read this: “THEREFOREHAVINGBEENJUSTIFIEDBYFAITHWEHAVEPEACEWITHGODTHROUGHOURLORD JESUSCHRIST”? It is not so hard when you really know the language, is it?

<sup>6</sup> UBS4 refers to United Bible Society's 4<sup>th</sup> Edition of the Greek New Testament, which a standard, highly respected edition of the New Testament.

*Step #2: Learn the how to pronounce Greek words and understand basic rules of forming Greek sentences. Study the following sections, using as many senses as possible (sight, hearing, speaking, writing) until you can figure out how words are pronounced without referring to these notes. Then, we will work to increase your speed and proficiency by reading actual Greek sentences.*

## Diphthongs

Diphthongs sound scary, but they are simply two vowels that are pronounced as one. You don't know it, but you are already used to them. For example, in the English word "group," the *ou* is pronounced as one vowel sound. Therefore, *ou* is a "diphthong."

Greek has seven diphthongs:

<i>Lower Case</i>	<i>Upper Case</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>
αι	AI	eye as in <u>ai</u> le
αυ	AY	ow as in kra <u>u</u> t
ει	EI	ay as in fre <u>igh</u> t (same as η)
ευ	EY	you as in fe <u>u</u> d
οι	OI	oy as in <u>oi</u> l
ου	OY	oo as in gr <u>ou</u> p (same as υ)
υι	YI	we as in <u>ui</u> te

Rarely, these vowel combinations will be pronounced as two separate vowel sounds. When this happens, there will be a *diaeresis* (¨) placed over the second vowel.<sup>7</sup> So, Ἡσαΐας is pronounced Ἡ σα ι ας and not Ἡ σαι ας.

## Other Sound Combinations

<i>Lower Case</i>	<i>Upper Case</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>
γγ	ΓΓ	ng as in ri <u>ng</u> <sup>8</sup>
γκ	ΓΚ	nk as in dri <u>nk</u>
γξ	ΓΞ	nx as in lyn <u>x</u> .
γχ	ΓΧ	nch (but nk as in dri <u>nk</u> is close enough)
ιε	IE	ee · eh (not a diphthong)
ιη	IH	yea (used for Ἰησοῦς, Jesus)
α̣	AI	a as in fa <u>th</u> er (same as normal α) <sup>9</sup>
η̣	HI	ā as in la <u>te</u> (same as normal η)
ω̣	ΩI	ō as in no <u>te</u> (same as normal ω)

<sup>7</sup> The English word *naïve* is pronounced "nā · eve" and not "nāv."

<sup>8</sup> Note that the Greek word for "angel" is ἄγγελος, which would be transliterated as *angelos*.

<sup>9</sup> This one and the next two are called "Iota Subscripts" because that little mark under the vowel is actually a ι that has combined with the previous vowel and is written under it. A subscripted iota does not effect pronunciation.

## ***Greek Syllabification***

In order to help us communicate with each other in and about the Greek language, it is important that we learn to pronounce the words consistently. Therefore, we must learn where to break up syllables. For example, take the English word “Bible.” It contains two syllables (Bi • ble); we don’t say “Bib • le.”

You will be glad to know that most Greek words are broken up in basically the same fashion as most English words. However, here are the basic rules of Greek syllabification:

- 1) There is only **one vowel (or diphthong) per syllable**. Count the number of vowels and diphthongs, and you know how many syllables are in each word.

ἄ μαρ τάν ω

λε λά λη μαι

- 2) A single consonant by itself goes with the following vowel. In other words, a Greek syllable will try to **start syllables with a consonant if possible**.

ἄ γα θός

θά να τος

- 3) **Compound words** (words that are formed by combining two other words (i.e., *racecar*)) **are divided where joined**.<sup>10</sup>

εἶς + πορεύομαι = εἰσπορεύομαι  
εἶσ πο ρεύ ο μαι

σύν + ἄγω = συνάγω  
συν άγω

- 4) **Vowels are divided** unless they are diphthongs.

δι και ο σύ νη

με τα νό ε ω

- 5) **Double consonants** and groups of **consonants that cannot begin words are divided** and the first consonant goes with the preceding vowel.<sup>11</sup>

εὐ αγ γέ λι ον

έλ πίζ

- 6) Any **consonant + μ or ν stays together** and goes with the following vowel.

με ρι μνά ω

δει κνύ ω

<sup>10</sup> Right now, you don’t know that εἶς and σύν are separate words. Don’t worry! You will soon.

<sup>11</sup> There is really no way to be absolutely sure if a certain group of consonants *could* begin a word, but you can look up that consonant cluster in a lexicon to see if there are any words that *do* begin with that cluster. Sorry this isn’t more precise—as a rule of thumb, go with your gut from common English combinations that can begin words like στ, βλ, γρ, πρ, etc. Combinations like λπ and ρτ do not begin words—they sound just as funny in Greek as they do in English.

## ***Greek Accents***

Ancient Greek was recognized as a “musical language” with rising and falling levels of pitch. However, it seems that by the time the New Testament was written, the use of accents to mark these musical levels of pitch appears to have ceased. In English and Modern Greek, accents mark *stress*, which is how we will use them. Therefore, in pronunciation, we will not distinguish between the three accent marks, but we will *stress* the syllable they mark.

The Greek accents are:

- The Acute (´)
- The Grave (`)
- The Circumflex (ˆ)

Here is a phrase from Romans 5:1: διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

Notice that the accents appear only over vowels. When over a diphthong, the accent appears over the second vowel (as in τοῦ).

The accents help us in three main ways; when:

- 1) **Pronouncing** – Accents help us remain consistent in our pronunciation. As you learn vocabulary, notice the accented syllable and always say the word with that syllable stressed. Doing so will simplify your memorization.<sup>12</sup>
- 2) **Detecting** – The circumflex helps us detect when vowel contraction has occurred. For example, the word ποιοῦμεν (“we are practicing”) was formed when ποιε had the ending ομεν attached to it (the ε and the ο “contracted” to form οῦ).<sup>13</sup>
- 3) **Distinguishing** – Accents help us distinguish between τίς (“who?”) and τις (“someone”).

At this point, the main thing that is that you stress the accented syllable when reading Greek.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, when you learn ἀγάπη, always say *a-GA-pā*. If you don’t, it will seem like you are learning *A-ga-pā*, *a-GA-pā*, and *a-ga-PĀ*.

<sup>13</sup> This is another piece of information that you won’t fully understand yet, but it will be helpful in the future if you know that circumflexes can indicate vowel contraction.



## Breathing Marks

When a vowel begins a Greek word, one of two marks will appear above it. These marks are called breathing marks:

Breathing Mark	Sound or Phonetic Value
´	Silent
(looks like an English apostrophe)	
ˆ	/h/ sound
(backward apostrophe)	

If a diphthong begins a word, the breathing mark will be positioned above the second vowel in the diphthong.

Finally, when a ρ begins a word, a rough breathing mark appears above it.

Examples:

- ἀγαθός *agathos* (Ever met ladies named “Agatha?” Their name means, “Good”).
- ἥλιος *helios* (means *sun*; where we get our word helium).
- ὦ *O!* or *Oh!* (as in “Oh, the depth of the riches . . .” in Romans 11:33).
- εἰς *eis* (means *in* or *into*). Notice the breathing mark over the second vowel.
- εἷς *heis* (means *one* or *single*). These breathing marks can make a difference!
- ἰάομαι *iaomai* (means *I am healing* as in pediatrics). Notice that the breathing mark is over the first vowel because *ια* is not a diphthong.
- ῥίζα *rhiza* (Notice the rough breathing mark and the transliteration of *rh*).

## Punctuation Marks

Greek and English do not have the same punctuation marks. Here is a table that shows our English punctuation marks and their Greek equivalents:

English Punctuation	Greek Equivalent
□.	□.
□,	□,
□;	□·
□?	□;
□’	□’