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The Language of the New Testament

In what language was the NT originally written? Almost all of the NT authors were Jews, but not a single book was written in Hebrew or Aramaic (a related Semitic language).[1] All of the NT books were written when Rome ruled the Mediterranean world, but none were written in Latin. Therefore we must turn to the one language prevalent during that period: ancient Greek. We have over five thousand manuscript copies of the NT written in Greek from the mid-second to the twelfth centuries. The earliest versions of the NT were in Syriac, Coptic, and Latin (as early as the second and third centuries); all presuppose a Greek original.

Unfortunately, the question of the NT language is not sufficiently answered with the statement that it was written in ancient Greek. This general statement prompts us to ask a more specific question: In what *dialect* of ancient Greek was the NT written? Or, stating it another way, was the NT written in the Old Ionic of Homer, the Attic of Plato, or the literary Koine of Philo? We will attempt to answer this complex question, first by reviewing

1. The Aramaic of first-century Palestine was a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew with a long historical development (from the twelfth century BC to the seventh century AD). It was the native language of Palestinian Judaism and was used by Jesus and primitive Jewish Christianity. See the classic discussion by Fitzmyer in his presidential address to Catholic Biblical Association, "Languages of Palestine." Although some scholars have argued that some NT texts were originally *composed* in Aramaic (e.g., Torrey, *The Four Gospels*), a consensus of scholars today rejects this thesis. Torrey also asserted that the Apocalypse of John was composed first in Aramaic: his commentary on it was published in 1956, fifteen years after his ideas about it first appeared in *Documents of the Primitive Church* (1941), and yet even after fifteen years, he could refer to no scholar who had been convinced by his arguments; still he speaks of his conclusions as fully established. An Aramaic influence on NT Greek is probable, however; see e.g., Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean*; Evans, "Introduction: An Aramaic Approach"; Stuckenbruck, "An Approach to the New Testament through Aramaic Sources"; Casey, *An Aramaic Approach to Q*.

briefly the history of development of the Greek language up to the present, and then by briefly examining the characteristics of NT Greek.

THE HISTORY OF THE GREEK LANGUAGE[2]

Greek has been a spoken language for more than three thousand years. Like all spoken languages, it has experienced constant changes, generally from more complex to simpler linguistic forms.[3] However, Greek can also be observed to have moved from periods of dialect differentiation to periods of dialect homogenization.[4] The periods of Greek can be divided approximately into the following four categories:[5]

Classical period	from Homer to Aristotle (1000–322 BC)
Hellenistic period	from Alexander the Great to the Roman emperor Justinian I (322 BC—AD 529)
Byzantine period	from Justinian I to the fall of Constantinople (529–1453)
Modern period	from 1453 to the present.

The Classical Period (1000–322 BC)

The classical period was characterized by a variety of different dialects, resulting from differences in culture and geographical location. Some of the dialects of this early period were as follows:

Old Ionic. This dialect of Achaea was in use from the tenth to the eighth centuries BC. The epic writings of Homer and Hesiod employ this dialect of Greek.[6]
Ionic. Used throughout the classical period, it was the Greek of Herodotus the historian and Hippocrates the physician. Ionic was the dialect of the southwest Asia Minor coast.
Attic. This sophisticated Greek of Athens was dominant in the classical period and greatly influenced the Hellenistic dialect. Attic was the linguistic medium of the orator Demosthenes, the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, the historians Thucydides and Xenophon, and the tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Attic was a smooth and harmonious dialect (like Ionic) in comparison with later NT Greek. It was also characterized by complex linguistic forms.

2. See Palmer *The Greek Language*; Horrocks *Greek*; Adrados, *A History of the Greek Language*; Christidis, *A History of Ancient Greek*. For some beginning texts in classical Greek studies, see Dickey, *Ancient Greek Scholarship*; Schaps, *Handbook for Classical Research*; Frede and Inwood, *Language and Learning*.

3. For further information, see Colwell, "Greek Language."

4. Thus Caragounis *The Development of Greek*, 21–60, lists five evolving phases of Greek:
1) Greek becomes differentiated from Proto-Aryan (before the Greeks come to the Hellenic peninsula)
2) The coming of the Greek to the Hellenic peninsula and the breakup into dialects (Ionic, Aiolic, Doric, Thessalic, Epirotic, etc.)
3) Hellenistic Period: Greek dialects reunited (Koine)
4) Byzantine and Late Byzantine: Greek again breaks up into dialects
5) Neohellenic: Greek reunites again (currently).

5. The four categories are from Metzger, "The Language of the New Testament," 44–46. These four periods suggested by Metzger correspond roughly to the last four periods of Caragounis in the previous note.

The grammar of Attic Greek was sophisticated and precise. It made ample use of the subjunctive and optative moods in verbs, the dual number in nouns and adjectives, and a bewildering maze of particles.[7] One example of preciseness in Attic Greek is that it could state in three words what would take ten in the English language: "I have been called up for service throughout the wars" (Thucydides). Such precision with an economy of expression was achieved by prefixes, suffixes, and infixes added to the three words. This compound formation of words is called synthesis.[8] In the next period with wider use among people of different cultures there would be a trend away from synthesis to analysis, e.g., some inserted a series of helping words rather then building on the same stem.

Attic Greek had an enduring influence for two reasons. First, it was the dialect of Athens, the city that had dominance over the other Greek communities after the Persian war. (It also took part in the colonization of the Aegean Sea region.) Second, the last great representative of the classical Attic dialect was Aristotle, the teacher of Alexander the Great. Although Aristotle's death marks the end of the classical period, the influence of Attic Greek continued.

6. In *Homeric Whispers*, Price locates Troy on Croatia's Dalmatian Coast and develops the thesis that the epics were originally in a Slavic dialect—a thesis he first put forward in 1985 in *Homer's Blind Audience*.

7. White, "Greek Language," *ZPE* 2:827.

8. Colwell "Greek Language," *IDB* 2:480.

The Hellenistic Period (322 BC—AD 529)

Alexander's conquest of the eastern Mediterranean world began the Hellenistic period. Two developments took place after the establishment of Alexander's empire: (1) The Greek language and culture penetrated the Orient (for example, Palestine, Egypt, and Persia); and (2) a homogenization of the numerous regional dialects produced a new form of Greek called Hellenistic or Koine (common) Greek.

This new Koine Greek was the result of internal and external factors. The following might have been some of them: First, within Alexander's army were men from all parts of Greece. Their close associations during the campaigns played a significant role in the emergence of a new type of Greek (which had already begun through increasing contact between city-states). Those elements of speech most widely current and readily adapted from various dialects tended to survive, whereas the less functional were dropped. Since Attic was the predominant language also spoken by Alexander, a tendency arose to conform to Attic standards. Second, wherever the army of Alexander went, this language was disseminated and took root in oriental soil with all the adaptations and modifications that generally accompany such assimilation. It must be noted, however, that the use of native dialects continued alongside the newly acquired Greek. For example, in Palestine most of the people spoke their native Aramaic as well as the Koine Greek.

In a relatively short period of time Koine Greek became the common means of communication in the Hellenistic age. After Alexander's death the Greek

language spread extensively throughout the Mediterranean world so that by the first century AD, Koine Greek was spoken from Spain to northwestern India and was the chief language of "ca. 80% of the citizens of the eastern end of the empire."[9]

Varieties of Koine included literary Koine, Attic, and vernacular Koine. Literary Koine comes closest to being a natural development of Attic. It became the most suitable vehicle for formal literature. This was the Koine of Polybius the historian, Strabo the geographer, Epictetus the philosopher, and the Jewish writers Josephus and Philo.

The Atticist dialect was developed by a few literary men to imitate the Attic of the classical age. It was an artificial, literary language in reaction to Koine Greek and only lasted a short period. Some of the participants in this short-lived Attic revival were Dionysus and Dio Chrysostom.

Vernacular or nonliterary Koine was the most influential of the period. It was the language of the street, home, marketplace, and farm. In comparison with Attic Greek, it was crude, often ungrammatical. Egyptian papyri, pottery fragments, and inscriptions dating from the third century BC to the fourth century AD (discovered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) give us a wealth of information about this vernacular.[10]

Before the discoveries of the Egyptian papyri and their evaluation by such men as Grenfell, Hunt, Deissmann, and Moulton, scholars were divided in their understanding of the NT language into at least two camps of interpretation: One camp regarded NT Greek as a distinct Hebraic or biblical Greek because of its use of the Greek OT and its lack of extrabiblical parallels (at that time).[11] Critics accused this camp of advocating a "Holy Ghost Greek" for the NT. The second camp evaluated the language according to the high standards of classical Attic. They generally regarded the NT Greek as decidedly inferior to its classical ancestor and concluded that it was a vulgar imitation by writers who used Greek as foreigners.

9. Caragounis, *The Development of Greek*, 45.

10. For information on the discoveries of the Egyptian papyri and inscriptions, see Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 1–61. See also Hunt and Edgar, *Select Papyri*; Grenfell and Hunt, *New Classical Fragments*; Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, vii–xx. Many papyri continued to be found, and finally in 1981 a group of papyrologists at Macquarie University began publishing *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Ancient History Documentary Research Center, Macquarie University, New South Wales 1981; vol. 2, 1982; vol. 3, 1983; vol. 4, 1987; vol. 5, 1989; vol. 6, 1992; vol. 7, 1994; vol. 8, 1998). *New Documents* is not a lexicon or a grammar. It gives the papyrus text examined and its translation in its entirety. It divides the texts both generically and topically and includes essays regarding grammatical, lexical, and social interest. An ancillary objective of the project was to work toward the more focused goal of compiling a "new Moulton-Milligan" (see Hemer, "Towards a New Moulton and Milligan," 97–123). See now the two articles ("Lexicon of the New Testament with Documentary Parallels") installments 1 and 2 written by Horsley and Lee in vols. 10 (1997, 55–84) and 11 (1998, 57–84) of *Filologia Neotestamentaria* giving format and sample articles for their preparation of the new Moulton-Milligan.

11. The premier advocate of this position in the mid to late twentieth century is Nigel Turner, who wrote the third (*Syntax*, 1963) and fourth (*Style*, 1976) volumes in Moulton's celebrated *Grammar of New Testament Greek*. For a critical evaluation of Turner's work, see Horsley, "The Fiction of Jewish Greek," 5–40. For a history of the Hebraist-Purist debate going back to the seventeenth century, see Voelz, "The Language of the New Testament," in *ANRW* II, 25/2, 893–977.

With the discovery of the Egyptian papyri our understanding of the NT language changed radically. No longer was the language of the NT viewed as a special biblical Greek or a vulgar imitation of Attic but as the colloquial language of the people of that day.

The Byzantine Period (AD 529–1453)

The Byzantine period continues the process of simplification typical of the Hellenistic period. The Byzantine period begins with the influential reign of Emperor Justinianus from Constantinople (who instigated the compilation of the Justinian Code of 529). He "declared Greek the official language of the Byzantium empire."[12] This period saw a low ebb in learning, and much of the distinctiveness of the Greek was lost through changes in syntax and through borrowings from other languages. The Turkish takeover in 1453 ended the Byzantine period. But during its twilight years, as a result of much political turmoil, a new period of dialectical differentiation began.

The Modern Period (AD 1453–Present)

This period, which Caragounis calls the Neohellenic period, continues a new phase of dialectical differentiation among Greek speakers, and though the number of dialects emerging from this period of "political and social isolation" of the Greeks is "impossible to calculate," he refers to estimates of "over seventy dialects."[13] Differentiation continued until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when Hellas was reconstituted as a free state (1828). This most recent political change for the Greeks led to many unsuccessful efforts at some linguistic unification through the use of a common dialect. The contentious period over "the language question" lasted until 1976 when Neohellenic Koine was finally adopted as the official language of Hellas.[14]

THE GREEK LANGUAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT[15]

Although they fit very comfortably into the common vernacular of the day, the literary qualities of the NT authors vary. Certain books, such as Hebrews and Luke-Acts, approach the literary Koine, but most fall within a broader vernacular spectrum of speech. The Gospels of Mark and John and the book of Revelation are typical of the popular colloquial Koine. They evidence a limited vocabulary and even a disregard for the ordinary rules of Greek syntax (e.g., Revelation). Mark, John, and Revelation also retain many Semitic and Aramaic idioms. The letters of Paul fit somewhere between literary and colloquial Koine. Although he is steeped in both the Greek OT and colloquial language, Paul speaks with the Koine of an educated man (e.g., Epictetus).

12. Caragounis, *Development of Greek*, 45.

13. Ibid., 49.

14. See the engaging discussion in Caragounis, *The Development of Greek,* 49–60.

15. Moulton, "Introduction," in Howard, *Accidence and Word Formation*, 1–34; Porter, *The Language of the New Testament*; Louw, "New Testament Greek," 159–72; Porter, "Greek Grammar and Syntax," 76–103. Beginning grammars are legion, but see Hewett, Robbins, Johnson, *New Testament Greek: Beginning and Intermediate Grammar*; see also the excellent introductory text to the subject of verbal aspect: Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect*.

Semitisms

Because most NT books were written by Jews, reflect a Palestinian setting, or use Palestinian sources, NT books show evidence of Semitic influence. The Semitisms of the NT originate from a number of sources: (1) borrowings from the language of the Greek OT (see below), (2) the occurrence of Aramaic terms and constructions, and (3) possible Hebrew constructions. Most Semitisms are borrowings from the language of the Greek OT, which is translation Greek in the Koine tradition. A number of Aramaic terms are retained in the Gospels, especially Mark (e.g., *Gethsemane*; *abba*; *eloi, eloi, lama sabachtani*; *Golgatha*; and *rabbi*), and some alleged-Aramaic constructions occur.[16] Although many Jews of Jesus's day knew Hebrew, its influence on the NT is difficult to discern. Much of the Hebraic style in NT Greek was derived from the LXX rather than from the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, some have argued that such expressions as "with joy you will rejoice" (you will rejoice greatly, John 3:27) or "before the face of his way" (Acts 13:24) are Hebrew constructions.[17] However, it is difficult to refute the claim that these Hebrew constructions were conveyed through Greek translations of the OT.

16. A fine discussion can be found in Mussies, "The Use of Hebrew and Aramaic," 416–32.

17. Also paratactic constructions connecting a series of independent clauses by conjunctions (such as *and*) are considered to be (Semitic) Hebraic constructions.

Latinisms

Latinisms are sparsely represented in the NT. They are chiefly military and commercial terminology: e.g., *centurion*, *legion*, *speculator*, *denarius*, and *colony*. The occurrence of Latinisms in the NT is probably due to the presence of the Roman military throughout the Mediterranean world. These isolated terms probably filtered into the popular colloquial Koine.[18]

Christian Vocabulary[19]

The possibility of a specific Christian element in the NT language must be approached with some reservation. Upon the discovery of the Egyptian papyri, many special "biblical terms"[20] (Thayer) were actually found to be part of the everyday language of the people (Deissmann, Bauer). Thayer originally argued for over seven hundred "biblical terms" in the NT. Deissmann brought this special list down to fifty, and Bauer reduced this list even more.[21] Of course the Christian communities used popular vocabulary and gave it a different nuance in the context of their worship and proclamation.

18. There are also a number of NT phrases that seem awkward in Greek but resemble familiar Latin idioms, e.g., Mark 15:15, 19; 14:65; Luke 12:58; Acts 17:9; 19:38. See Moule, *An Idiom Book*, 192.

19. Notable recent sources for the study of Christian vocabulary include the following: Lee, *A History of New Testament Lexicography*; Danker's complete 2000 revision of Bauer's *A Greek-English Lexicon* (BDAG); and Silva's *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*.

20. See, for example, the long list of "Biblical or New Testament" Greek words in Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon*. 1889. (appendix 3), 693–710.

21. See how the list of "Christian terminology" is considerably shortened in BDAG, xix–xxviii.

But reservation should be maintained about the possibility of the *creation* of new Christian terms and phrases.

THE SEPTUAGINT, AQUILA, SYMMACHUS, THEODOTION[22]

Septuagint (*Septuaginta*; the full title was *Interpretatio septuaginta virorum*: "the interpretation of the seventy elders") means "seventy" in Latin. It is the abbreviated name given to a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made between the third century BC and the first century AD in Alexandria, Egypt, under the initial direction of Philadelphus, king of the Hellenistic kingdom in Egypt. It is usually abbreviated with Roman numerals as LXX (70). According to fanciful tradition, seventy or seventy-two Jewish elders from Jerusalem were brought to Alexandria (six from each of the twelve tribes of Israel) to do the work of translating the sacred texts into Greek for the great library at Alexandria. According to the *Letter of Aristeas*, the elders were brought to Philadelphus, who gave a banquet in their honor, during which he tested them as to their expertise and proficiency. Each of the seventy-two elders brought with him a copy of the Jewish Law written on animal skins in letters of gold. Shortly afterward the elders began the work of translation. According to Aristeas, they worked for seventy-two days, comparing their work with one another at intervals. In this manner the work was completed.

Early Christian historians repeat the story, though with some minor variations. According to some early Christian tradition, the seventy-two elders worked separately in total isolation. They all emerged seventy-two days later, and when their individual translations were compared, they all miraculously agreed, word for word. In this way divine inspiration (of sorts) was attributed to the translation. If nothing else, this elaboration of the story reflects the high esteem in which the early church held this translation. It is the translation most often used in the quotations of the OT in the NT texts.

In the postapostolic period (in the second and early third centuries) several other translations appeared (Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion). Aquila's translation was very literal, completed in AD 130, and was preferred by Jews as well as by the Jewish Christian sect called the Ebionites. Jewish scholars grew to object to the LXX especially as Christians used it for proof-texting doctrines such as the virgin birth of Jesus (through an appeal to Isa 7:14 in Matt 1:23: "Behold the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel"). In this case the Hebrew word translated into English as "virgin" means simply "young girl," but the LXX translated the Hebrew word with the Greek word for "virgin."

Origen, the great Alexandrian scholar of the late second and early third centuries, created a parallel text of the Old Testament with six columns; hence it was called the *Hexapla*. The six columns featured (1) the Hebrew text, (2) a transliteration of the Hebrew using Greek letters

22. Recent books on the LXX include Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context*; McLay, *The Use of the Septuagint in New Testament Research*; Hengel, *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture*; Dines, *The Septuagint*; Jobes and Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*; Wasserstein and Wasserstein, *The Legend of the Septuagint*.

(3) the Aquila translation, (4) the Symmachus translation, (5) the Septuagint, (6) the Theodotion translation. Eusebius in his *Hist. eccl.* (6.16) describes the work in some detail. Origen recognized the value of the other Greek versions of the Hebrew and wanted future Christian scholars to use them to check and correct the Septuagint. He also compiled a Tetrapla (four columns), eliminating the first two columns. Origen was perhaps the first Christian scholar not of Jewish birth who learned Hebrew so that he might interpret the Jewish Scriptures.

Thus the Septuagint emerged as one of the monumental Greek texts of the Hellenistic period. The complexity of its (alleged) origins and characteristics reflect something of the typical complexity of Hellenistic Greek as a whole: the LXX was undertaken in Egypt by Judeans and included translations of an ancient Semitic text as well as freely composed Greek. As a translation it varies in quality and readability. Sometimes its Greek barely betrays that a Semitic original lies covered beneath it; sometimes its Greek is so literal that the Semitic text is easily imagined behind it. Scholars value it for a plethora of reasons. It is of value to text critics, although sometimes the Hebrew text lying behind it is like nothing that we actually possess. It is of value to theologians, as it represents not only an interpretation of the Hebrew Bible itself (because every translation is an interpretation), but also because it was used by the early church in the expression and development of early Christian theology. It is of interest to philologists, as it is a broadly mixed specimen of Hellenistic Greek, though with many complex dimensions. It is of interest to lexicographers, as it often affected the meaning of lexemes used by the early church, and as it often reflects an understanding of an obscure Hebrew word or phrase. It is of interest to sociologists, as it represents a product of cultural contact. It is of interest to linguists who work currently in the area of Bible translation, because it is an example of what they aspire to do, however imperfectly it was done.