

The Case for Modern Pronunciation of Biblical Greek

C. Norman Sellers, Th.D

In the majority of Christian educational institutions today artificial pronunciations for NT Greek and OT Hebrew are used-often attempts at a recreation of the true ancient sounds. However, Modern Greek and Modern Hebrew voicings are in reality the most effective ways to teach these ancient biblical tongues. This is especially so because within the last forty years (a) audio-visual teaching aids have become available so that NT Greek can be taught as a living language and (b) OT Hebrew is actually living again in Israel and can now be mastered with a new thoroughness. One difficulty is that the current generations of teachers was trained in the “older” pronunciations themselves and are thus hesitant to make such a change.

Introduction

Every foreign language offers unique learning experiences to those who study it. Often these experiences are only indirectly related to the actual study of the language and include the understanding and appreciation of their cultures, modes of thinking, and a general broadening of intellectual horizons.

Students of NT Greek sometimes encounter statements such as "Say something in Greek," which are often the cause for some embarrassment and bring into focus certain problems with pedagogical methodology often used in the study of ancient foreign languages. How to respond to such a request is particularly a problem for the student of NT Greek or OT Hebrew. The student might decline by explaining that NT Greek is studied only for translation purposes, not for conversation. But this sounds strange to anyone acquainted with the study of modern foreign languages, and one must wonder about a teaching method which prepares a student to verbalize little more than a list of words from his grammar book or the Greek NT, to say nothing of auditory comprehension or composition.

And it is not only the Greek student who is at a verbal or auditory loss. Even after years of working with the language, and after having mastered the translation and exegesis of the NT, many Greek scholars would be incapable of communicating on the streets of Athens on the basis of their NT Greek knowledge alone.

This raises several serious questions: Have the scholars of biblical languages always been content with translation alone? Have they always neglected the learning of the language in a way that would enable them to communicate with native speakers so as to benefit from the native intuition of usage and syntax?

And what about students of biblical Hebrew? Is it not possible that even more than in the case of Greek, Modern Hebrew offers students an opportunity to understand their Hebrew Bibles better? Is it not possible that the pedagogical methodology of American biblical languages teachers is past due for extensive revision?

As A. T. Robertson said, "this is indeed a knotty problem and has been the occasion of fierce controversy."¹ It is not the intention of the writers to feed this controversy, but it does seem that something needs to be said today in defense of treating NT Greek and OT Hebrew as older dialects of languages which are still living today.

Historical Method

Invariably, when the subject of Greek pronunciation is broached, this is the question: How did native speakers during the apostolic period pronounce it? Robertson wrote that "we may be sure of one thing, the pronunciation of the vernacular was not exactly like the ancient literary attic [classical] nor precisely like the modern Greek vernacular, but veering more toward the latter."² Howard recognizes the complicating factor of dialects when he observes that "it is probable that considerable differences existed between the Greek of Rome and Asia, Hellos and Egypt."³

It is generally recognized that it is impossible to reconstruct precisely the pronunciation system of 1st century Greek speakers. And as a result some have preferred a reconstructed classical [attic] pronunciation, while others have preferred to use a real pronunciation that is capable of being tested by actual first-hand observation, the pronunciation of Modern Greek.

It is Erasmus (1466-1536) who is generally credited with formulating the reconstructed classical pronunciation, generally popular in the West today. At about the same time Reuchlin (1455-1522) introduced the Byzantine (modern) pronunciation in Western Europe.

The debate over the relative merits of these two systems became so heated in Cambridge in 1542 that "it was categorically forbidden to distinguish αι from ε or ει and οι from ι, under penalty of expulsion from the Senate, exclusion from the attainment of a degree, rustication for students, and domestic chastisement for boys."⁴

But in the end it was Erasmian pronunciation that won the day in the West.

Comparison of the Two Systems

One might think that the differences between the two systems are very large, but they are in fact less different than they are similar.

There are only six letters of the alphabet in which there are pronunciation differences:

	<u>Erasmian</u>	<u>Modern</u>
β	b-boy	v-victory
γ	g-got	g-got but also y, before any e sound, as in yet
δ	d-dog	th-the
ζ	dz-ads	z-zoo
η	a-late	ee-feet

The larger differences are found in the pronunciation of the diphthongs, among which only ου is pronounced the same in both systems. The differences are:

	<u>Erasmian</u>	<u>Modern</u>
ει	a-late/i-ice	ee-feet
οι	oi-oil	ee-feet
υι	uee- queen	ee-feet
αι	ai-aisle	e-let
ευ	eu-feud	ev or ef (depending on the following sound)
αυ	ow-cow	av or af (depending on the following sound)

In addition to these differences, two consonant clusters vary between the two systems:

ντ	nt-sent entoleo)	nd-send (endoleo)
μπ	mp-lamp	b-biscuit

It is clear, then, that except for the diphthongs and these consonant clusters, there is little difference between the two systems of pronunciation.

Since one cannot reconstruct precisely the 1st-century pronunciation of NT Greek, one must make his decision about the system he will use based on the relative merits of each. The Erasmian system is based on the principle that each letter should be pronounced as differently as possible from every other letter. This is its chief pedagogical advantage for beginning students, even though it is obviously phonetically naive. The similarity between Erasmian b and English "b" is pedagogically more simple to teach than the modern phonological value, "v." The same is true of αι and English ai in "aisle." Thus, if the student is not expected to speak to anyone in Greek, the relative ease with which the transition from English to Greek can be made is advantageous. But the advantage is very small indeed if in the process the student is giving up the possibility of learning to speak and hear the language-something which every modern foreign language teacher would consider a *sine qua non*. It is not a great burden to learn the extra few sounds necessary to make the transition from English to Modern Greek pronunciation as opposed to Erasmian pronunciation. After all, there are considerable differences between English and either system which must be mastered in any event. The supposed advantage of Erasmian pronunciation shrinks even further when it is realized that there is no unanimity even among Erasmians about how some of the consonants and vowels are to be pronounced. For example, ει is long e to some and long a to others; ο (omicron) is long oo to some and short o to others.

There are other more obvious advantages to using Modern Greek pronunciation. One of these is that the student is learning the sounds of a living language. A knowledge of the modern pronunciation will make it possible for the student to converse with native speakers, whether in his own country or abroad, and this will be a great source of encouragement as he struggles to master the rudiments of the language.

Another advantage of the modern pronunciation is that it makes it possible for the student to use a number of audio materials now becoming available. Spiros Zodhiates, for example, has produced cassette tapes and CD's of Machen's vocabularies and exercises, as well as both the Koine NT and

Modern Greek NT. Those who have actually gained thinking, speaking, hearing, and composition facility in a second language will recognize immediately that such kinds of audio aids are invaluable.

Yet another advantage of the Modern Greek pronunciation is that it makes much more possible an approach (however slight at first) toward the acquisition of language intuition. Native intuition it may never become, but the constant hearing and speaking of a real pronunciation system will undoubtedly facilitate a better intuition for semantic range and grammatical nuance.

A further advantage is that National Bible College has an excellent Beginning Greek course using Modern Pronunciation. It is a studio recording in totally remastered and digitized VHS and DVD formats. The course follows the Machen Greek text and utilizes a workbook which teaches grammar by diagramming, audio tapes and CD's for rote learning, and vocabulary cards for memorization. Additional helps for the course include 1) a booklet and cassette tape or CD of familiar hymns and choruses, 2) a list of modern words and phrases with a cassette tape or CD, 3) a video for children (of all ages) with an "alpha-beta" song.

Should One Change?

The circumstances today are much different from the time of Erasmus and even A. T. Robertson. Access to study opportunities in Greece is easier and video materials and audio materials such as easily duplicated cassettes and CD's are more readily available. In light of the advantages of the modern pronunciation and the easy access to modern Greek materials as well as native speakers of Modern Greek, there seems to be no compelling reason to retain the Erasmian pronunciation system.

1 A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1923), 236.

2 *Ibid.*, 239.

3 *Ibid.*, 41-42.

4 *Ibid.*, 237.

5 Using such helps, for example, as T. A. Armstrong, D. L. Busby, and Cyril F. Carr, *A Reader's Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980-); John Joseph Owens, *Genesis* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978); Bruce Einspahr, *Index to the Brown, Driver, & Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1976).