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Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar: Third Edition

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mounce, William D.

Basics of biblical Greek grammar / William D. Mounce. — 3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-310-28768-1 (hardcover)

1. Greek language, Biblical—Grammar. 2. Bible. N.T.—Language, style. I. Title.

PA817.M63 2009

487'.4—dc22

2009023109

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Edited by Verlyn D. Verbrugge

Typeset by Teknia Software

Printed in China

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Chapter 3

The Alphabet and Pronunciation

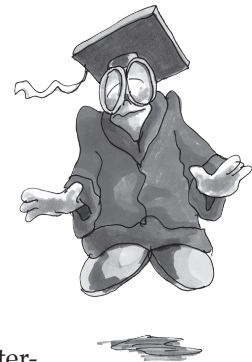
Overview

I start each chapter with an overview of what you will be learning. This will give you a feel for what is to come, and should also be an encouragement when you see that there is not too much information in each chapter.

In this chapter you will learn:

- to write and pronounce the alphabet (consonants, vowels, diphthongs);
- that “breathing marks” are on every word beginning with a vowel.

Footnotes in the Grammar are not necessary to learn, although they are often interesting. The footnotes in the Workbook, however, are important.



The Greek Alphabet

3.1 The Greek alphabet has twenty-four letters.¹ At first it is only important to learn the English name, small letters, and pronunciation. The transliterations² will help. In our texts today, capitals are used only for proper names, the first word in a quotation, and the first word in the paragraph.³ There is some disagreement as to the correct pronunciation of a few of the letters; these are marked in the footnotes. I have chosen the standard pronunciations that will help you learn the language the easiest.

¹ There were several more, but they dropped out of use before the Classical period. In some cases their influence can still be felt, especially in verbs.

² A transliteration is the equivalent of a letter in another language. For example, the Greek “beta” (β) is transliterated with the English “b.” This does not mean that a similar combination of letters in one language has the same meaning as the same combination in another. *κατ* does not mean “cat.” But the Greek “β” and the English “b” have the same sounds and often similar functions, and therefore it is said that the English “b” is the transliteration of the Greek “beta.”

³ Originally the Bible was written in all capital letters without punctuation, accent marks, or spaces between the words. John 1:1 began, *ENAPXHHNOΛOΓOΣ*. Capital letters, or “majuscules,” were used until the sixth century A.D. (“Uncials” are a form of capital letters.) “Cursive” script is like our handwriting where the letters are joined together. Cursive script started being used in the third century A.D. In Greek texts today, John 1:1 begins, *Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος*.

To see how modern pronunciation is different, get the download from the class website on Chapter 3. Here is where they are different.

- β as “v” in “vase”
- γ as “y” in “yes” (when followed by ε, η, ι, or υ) or “ch” in “loch” (when followed by α, ο, or ω)
- δ as “th” in “the”
- η as “ee” in “feet”
- ι as the long “i” in “intrigue”
- ο as “o” in “note”
- ρ has a slight trilled sound
- υ as short “i” in “intrigue”



Notice the many similarities among the Greek and English letters, not only in shape and sound but also in their respective order in the alphabet. The Greek alphabet can be broken down into sections. It will parallel the English for a while, differ, and then begin to parallel again. Try to find these natural divisions.

The following chart shows the name of the letter (in English and Greek), the English transliteration (in italics), the letter written as a capital and as a small letter, and its pronunciation.

Alpha	ἄλφα	<i>a</i>	A	α	a as in father ⁴
Beta	βῆτα	<i>b</i>	B	β	b as in Bible
Gamma	γάμμα	<i>g</i>	Γ	γ	g as in gone
Delta	δέλτα	<i>d</i>	Δ	δ	d as in dog
Epsilon	ἒ ψιλόν	<i>e</i>	Ε	ε	e as in met
Zeta	ζῆτα	<i>z</i>	Ζ	ζ	z as in daze
Eta	ἦτα	<i>ē</i>	Η	η	e as in obey
Theta	θῆτα	<i>th</i>	Θ	θ	th as in thing
Iota	ἰῶτα	<i>i</i>	Ι	ι	i as in intrigue ⁵
Kappa	κάππα	<i>k</i>	Κ	κ	k as in kitchen
Lambda	λάμβδα	<i>l</i>	Λ	λ	l as in law
Mu	μῦ	<i>m</i>	Μ	μ	m as in mother
Nu	νῦ	<i>n</i>	Ν	ν	n as in new
Xi	ξῖ	<i>x</i>	Ξ	ξ	x as in axiom
Omicron	ὀ μικρόν	<i>o</i>	Ο	ο	o as in not ⁶
Pi	πί	<i>p</i>	Π	π	p as in peach
Rho	ῥῶ	<i>r</i>	Ρ	ρ	r as in rod
Sigma	σίγμα	<i>s</i>	Σ	σ/ς	s as in study
Tau	ταῦ	<i>t</i>	Τ	τ	t as in talk
Upsilon	ῦ ψιλόν	<i>u/y</i> ⁷	Υ	υ	u as the German ü ⁸
Phi	φῖ	<i>ph</i>	Φ	φ	ph as in phone

⁴ Technically, the alpha can be long or short, but the difference in time required to distinguish the two is so miniscule that for now just concentrate on saying the alpha as the “a” in “father.”

In standard pronunciation, the sound of the short alpha was not different from the sound of the long alpha; the short alpha does not go to the sound of the “a” in “hat.” There is much discussion on this type of issue among scholars.

⁵ The iota can be either long (“intrigue”) or short (“intrigue”). Listen to how your teacher pronounces the words and you will pick up the differences.

⁶ The omicron is pronounced by some with a long “o” sound as in the word “obey.” It is pronounced by others with a short “o” sound as in the word “not.” In modern Greek it is long as is omega. Standard pronunciation uses a short *o* sound in order to differentiate the omicron from the omega.

⁷ When upsilon occurs as a single vowel (i.e., not preceded by a vowel), it is transliterated as a “y.” ὑπέρ becomes *hyper*. αὐτός becomes *autos*.

⁸ Other suggestions are the u in “universe” and the oo in “book.”

Chi	χ̂	ch	X	χ	ch as in Loch ⁹
Psi	ψ̂	ps	Ψ	ψ	ps as in lips
Omega	ὦ μέγα	ō	Ω	ω	o as in tone

3.2 Writing the Letters

1. Notice how α β δ ε ι κ ο ς τ and υ look like their English counterparts.
2. In Greek there are four letters that are transliterated by two letters.
 - θ is th
 - φ is ph
 - χ is ch
 - ψ is ps
3. It is important that you do not confuse the following.
 - η (eta) with the English “n”
 - ν (nu) with the “v”
 - ρ (rho) with the “p”
 - χ (chi) with the “x” or
 - ω (omega) with the “w”
4. There are two sigmas in Greek. ς occurs only at the end of the word and σ occurs elsewhere: ἀπόστολος.
5. The vowels in Greek are α, ε, η, ι, ο, υ, ω.

3.3 Pronouncing the Letters

1. You will learn the alphabet best by pronouncing the letters out loud as you write them, over and over. Be sure to listen to the summary lecture on Teknia.com for practice.
2. The name of a consonant is formed with the help of a vowel, but the sound of the consonant does not include that vowel. For example, μ is the letter “mu,” but when mu appears in the word, there is no “u” sound.
3. The following letters sound just like their English counterparts: α β γ δ ε ι κ λ μ ν ο π ρ σ/ς τ.
4. Gamma (γ) usually has a hard “g” sound, as in “get.” However, when it is immediately followed by γ, κ, χ, or ξ, it is pronounced as a “n.” For example, the word ἄγγελος is pronounced “angelos” (from which we get our word “angel”). The gamma pronounced like a “n” is called a **gamma nasal**.¹⁰
5. Alpha and iota can be either long or short. Epsilon and omicron are always short while eta and omega are always long.
“Long” and “short” refer to the relative length of time it requires to pronounce the vowel. In the case of iota, the sound of the vowel actually changes as well.

It is fun to use the Greek alphabet to write out English words. Of course, they aren't really Greek words, but they do help you get familiar with the alphabet. What English words do the following refer to? When done, write out a few of your own.

βεδ, κατ, βιλλ, βαλλ, σιτ, στανδ, φλυφε (someone's dog), ρεδ βυλλ, φησβουκ, τεξ.



⁹ Pronounced with a decided Scottish accent.

¹⁰ Most gamma nasals are formed from the γγ combination.

3.4 Breathing marks

Greek has two breathing marks. Every word beginning with a vowel or rho has a breathing mark.

- The **rough** breathing is a ´ placed over the first vowel and adds an “h” sound to the word. ὑπέρ is pronounced “huper.” Every word that begins with a rho or upsilon takes a rough breathing.
- The **smooth** breathing is a ˘ placed over the first vowel and is not pronounced. ἀπόστολος is pronounced “apostolos.”

If a word begins with a capital single vowel, the breathing is placed before the vowel (e.g., Ἰσαάκ).

3.5 Pronouncing diphthongs

1. A **diphthong** is two vowels that produce one sound. The second vowel is always an ι or an υ. They are pronounced as follows.¹¹

αι	as in aisle	αἶρω
ει	as in eight	εἶ
οι	as in oil	οἰκία
αυ	as in sauerkraut	αὐτός
ου	as in soup	οὐδέ
υι	as in suite	υἱός
ευ, ηυ	as in feud ¹²	εὐθύς / ηὔξανεν

υι and ηυ are less common than the others.

2. An **improper diphthong** is made up of a vowel and an **iota subscript**. An iota subscript is a small iota written under the vowels α, η, or ω (α, η, ω) and normally is the last letter in a word. This iota has no effect on the pronunciation but is essential for translation, so pay close attention to it.

α	ῶρα
η	γραφεῖ
ω	λόγω

3. If a word begins with a diphthong, the breathing mark is placed over the second vowel of the diphthong (αἰτέω, Αἴγυπτος).
4. In some words you will find two vowels that normally form a diphthong, but in the case of this word do not. To show that these two vowels are pronounced as two separate sounds, a **diaeresis** (¨) is placed over the second vowel.

αι normally forms a diphthong, but in the case of Ἡσαΐας, the diaeresis indicates that αι forms two separate sounds: Ἡ σα ῖ ας. Cf. naïve in English.

Here is how the diphthongs are different in modern Greek.

- αι as “e” in “hen”
- ει as “ee” in “meet”
- οι as “ee” in “meet”
- αυ as “af” or “av”
- ευ as “eff” or “ev”
- υι as the short “i” in “intrigue”



¹¹ ωυ is used in Classical Greek, but occurs in the New Testament only in the name Μωϋσῆς where there is always a diaeresis, indicating that it is not a diphthong.

¹² Some suggest that the pronunciation of ηυ is the same as saying “hey you” if you run the words together.

Summary



1. It is essential that you learn the Greek alphabet right away. You cannot learn anything else until you do.
2. Learn the English name, how to write the small letter, and how to pronounce the letter.
3. The vowels in Greek are α , ϵ , η , ι , \omicron , υ , and ω .
4. Every word beginning with a vowel must have either a rough or smooth breathing mark. If the word begins with a diphthong, the breathing mark is over the second vowel. If the word begins with a single vowel and is capitalized, the breathing goes before the first vowel.
5. A diphthong consists of two vowels pronounced as a single sound. The second vowel is always an iota or upsilon.
6. An improper diphthong is a diphthong with an iota subscript under the first vowel. The iota subscript does not affect pronunciation but is important in translation.

Advanced Information

In most of the chapters there is information that some teachers consider essential, but others do not. I have included that kind of information in the Advanced Information section of each chapter.

3.6 Capital letters. If you want to learn capitals, notice that there are very few unexpected forms. The unusual ones are in blue. Notice which ones might be confusing (Ξ , Θ , Σ , E, P and the English P).

<i>capital</i>	<i>small</i>	<i>capital</i>	<i>small</i>
A	α	N	ν
B	β	Ξ	ξ
Γ	γ	O	\omicron
Δ	δ	Π	π
E	ϵ	P	ρ
Z	ζ	Σ	σ/ς
H	η	T	τ
Θ	θ	Υ	υ
I	ι	Φ	ϕ
K	κ	X	χ
Λ	λ	Ψ	ψ
M	μ	Ω	ω

Now write these English words with Greek letters:

computer, Skype, Bible (write as "Bibel"), program, thud, monster drink (with gamma nasal).

What are some more English words you could practice on?

