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New Testament Greek: A Brief Introduction

by **J. Gresham Machen** (1881-1937)



The following essay served as the introductory article for Machen's Greek textbook titled, *New Testament Greek For Beginners*, (New York: Macmillan, 1923). This article is now in the public domain and may be freely copied and distributed. The electronic edition of this book was scanned and edited by Shane Rosenthal for *Reformation Ink*. Original pagination has been retained for purposes of reference.

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During the classical period, the Greek language was divided into a number of dialects, of which there were three great families—the Doric, the Aeolic, and the Ionic. In the fifth century before Christ, one branch of the Ionic family, the Attic, attained the supremacy, especially as the language of prose literature. The Attic dialect was the language of Athens in her glory—the language of Thucydides, of Plato, of Demosthenes, and of most of the other great prose writers of Greece.

Various causes contributed to make the Attic dialect dominant in the Greek-speaking world. First and foremost must be put the genius of the Athenian writers. But the political and commercial importance of Athens was also not without its effect. Hosts of strangers came into contact with Athens through government, war and trade, and the Athenian colonies also extended the influence of the mother city. The Athenian Empire, indeed, soon fell to pieces. Athens was conquered first by Sparta in the Peloponnesian war, and then, in the middle of the fourth century before Christ, along with the other Greek cities, came under the domination of the king of Macedonia, Philip. But the influence of the Attic dialect survived the loss of political power; the language of Athens became also the language of her conquerors.

Macedonia was not originally a Greek kingdom, but it adopted the dominant

civilization of the day, which was the civilization of Athens. The tutor of Philip's son, Alexander the Great, was Aristotle, the Greek philosopher; and that fact is only one indication of the conditions of the time. With astonishing rapidity Alexander made himself master of the whole eastern world, and the triumphs of the Macedonian

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arms were also triumphs of the Greek language in its Attic form. The empire of Alexander, indeed, at once fell to pieces after his death in 323 B.C.; but the kingdoms into which it was divided were, at least so far as the court and the governing classes were concerned, Greek kingdoms. Thus the Macedonian conquest meant nothing less than the Hellenization of the East, or at any rate it meant an enormous acceleration of the Hellenizing process which had already begun.

When the Romans, in the last two centuries before Christ, conquered the eastern part of the Mediterranean world, they made no attempt to suppress the Greek language. On the contrary, the conquerors to a very considerable extent were conquered by those whom they conquered. Rome herself had already come under Greek influence, and now she made use of the Greek language in administering at least the eastern part of her vast empire. The language of the Roman Empire was not so much Latin as it was Greek.

Thus in the first century after Christ Greek had become a world language. The ancient languages of the various countries did indeed continue to exist, and many districts were bilingual—the original local languages existing side by side with the Greek. But at least in the great cities throughout the Empire—certainly in the East—the Greek language was everywhere understood. Even in Rome itself there was a large Greek-speaking population. It is not surprising that Paul's letter to the Roman Church is written not in Latin but in Greek.

But the Greek language had to pay a price for this enormous extension of its influence. In its career of conquest it experienced important changes. The ancient Greek dialects other than Attic, although they disappeared almost completely before the beginning of the Christian era, may

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have exerted considerable influence upon the Greek of the new unified world. Less important, no doubt, than the influence of the Greek dialects, and far less important than might have been expected, was the influence of foreign languages. But influences of a more subtle and less tangible kind were mightily at work. Language is a reflection of the intellectual and spiritual habits of the

people who use it. Attic prose, for example, reflects the spiritual life of a small city-state, which was unified by an intense patriotism and a glorious literary tradition. But after the time of Alexander, the Attic speech was no longer the language of a small group of citizens living in the closest spiritual association; on the contrary it had become the medium of exchange for peoples of the most diverse character. It is not surprising, then, that the language of the new cosmopolitan age was very different from the original Attic dialect upon which it was founded.

This new world language which prevailed after Alexander has been called not inappropriately "the Koine." The word "Koine" means "common"; it is not a bad designation, therefore, for a language which was a common medium of exchange for diverse peoples. The Koine, then, is the Greek world language that prevailed from about 300 B.C. to the close of ancient history at about A.D. 500.

The New Testament was written within this Koine period. Linguistically considered, it is united in a very close way with the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the "Septuagint," which was made at Alexandria in the centuries just preceding the Christian era, and with certain Christian writings of the early part of the second century after Christ, which are ordinarily associated under the name "Apostolic Fathers." Within this triple group, it is true, the language of the New Testament is easily supreme. But so far as the bare instrument of expression

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is concerned the writings of the group belong together. Where, then, within the development of the Koine is this whole group to be placed?

It has always been observed that the language of the New Testament differs strikingly from the great Attic prose writers such as Thucydides or Plato or Demosthenes. That fact is not surprising. It can easily be explained by the lapse of centuries and by the important changes which the creation of the new cosmopolitanism involved. But another fact is more surprising. It is discovered, namely, that the language of the New Testament differs not merely from that of the Attic prose writers of four centuries before, but also from that of the Greek writers of the very period within which the New Testament was written. The Greek of the New Testament is very different, for example, from the Greek of Plutarch.

This difference used sometimes to be explained by the hypothesis that the New Testament was written in a Jewish- Greek dialect—a form of Greek very strongly influenced by the Semitic languages, Hebrew and Aramaic. But in

recent years another explanation has been coming increasingly into vogue. This other explanation has been given an important impetus by the discovery, in Egypt, of the "nonliterary papyri." For the most part the Koine had until recently been known to scholars almost exclusively through literature. But within the past twenty or thirty years there have been discovered in Egypt, where the dry air has preserved even the fragile writing-material of antiquity, great numbers of documents such as wills, receipts, petitions and private letters. These documents are not "literature." Many of them were intended merely to be read once and then thrown away. They exhibit, therefore, not the polished language of books but the actual spoken language of everyday life. And on account of their important

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divergence from the language of such writers as Plutarch they have revealed with new clearness the interesting fact that in the Koine period there was a wide gap between the language of literature and the language of every day. The literary men of the period imitated the great Attic models with more or less exactitude; they maintained an artificial literary tradition. The obscure writers of the non-literary papyri, on the other hand, imitated nothing, but simply expressed themselves, without affectation, in the language of the street.

But it is discovered that the language of the New Testament, at various points where it differs from the literature even of the Koine period, agrees with the non-literary papyri. That discovery has suggested a new hypothesis to account for the apparent peculiarity of the language of the New Testament. It is now supposed that the impression of peculiarity which has been made upon the minds of modern readers by New Testament Greek is due merely to the fact that until recently our knowledge of the spoken as distinguished from the literary language of the Koine period has been so limited. In reality, it is said, the New Testament is written simply in the popular form of the Koine which was spoken in the cities throughout the whole of the Greek-speaking world.

This hypothesis undoubtedly contains a large element of truth. Undoubtedly the language of the New Testament is no artificial language of books, and no Jewish-Greek jargon, but the natural, living language of the period. But the Semitic influence should not be underestimated. The New Testament writers were nearly all Jews, and all of them were strongly influenced by the Old Testament. In particular, they were influenced, so far as language is concerned, by the Septuagint, and the Septuagint was influenced, as most ancient translations were, by the language of

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the original. The Septuagint had gone far toward producing a Greek vocabulary to express the deepest things of the religion of Israel. And this vocabulary was profoundly influential in the New Testament. Moreover, the originality of the New Testament writers should not be ignored. They had come under the influence of new convictions of a transforming kind, and those new convictions had their effect in the sphere of language. Common words had to be given new and loftier meanings, and common men were lifted to a higher realm by a new and glorious experience. It is not surprising then, that despite linguistic similarities in detail the New Testament books, even in form, are vastly different from the letters that have been discovered in Egypt. The New Testament writers have used the common, living language of the day. But they have used it in the expression of uncommon thoughts, and the language itself, in the process, has been to some extent transformed. The Epistle to the Hebrews shows that even conscious art could be made the instrument of profound sincerity, and the letters of Paul, even the shortest and simplest of them, are no mere private jottings intended to be thrown away, like the letters that have been discovered upon the rubbish heaps of Egypt, but letters addressed by an apostle to the Church of God. The cosmopolitan popular language of the Graeco-Roman world served its purpose in history well. It broke down racial and linguistic barriers. And at one point in its life it became sublime.

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