

It's Not Greek to Me

by Bill Moller

Recently, I decided to take a class to learn Biblical Greek, the language in use when the original text of the New Testament was written. As I sat thinking about this undertaking, I remembered that one of the best ways to reinforce what one learns is to teach the material to someone else. What you are about to read is that effort. I invite you to follow along and discover the alphabet used in Biblical Greek.

I suspect any self respecting kindergartener might tell you that one needs to practice the alphabet before actually learning a language. Do you remember the worksheets used in elementary school – the kind with the bands of three horizontal lines? A letter was already printed at the beginning of each band and the idea was to copy the sample and repeat the process over and over until you filled the page. Seems simple now doesn't it. *A A A ... B B B ... C C C ...* Well, try that procedure and you discover how little your hand has learned since grade school.

My *Basics of Biblical Greek* workbook uses the same worksheets. Upon completing the copying of three pages of Greek letters, my left hand knew exactly what my right hand was doing and wanted to disown it. I'm a fairly coordinated person, but this exercise was quite embarrassing. The scribbled pages looked as if I had given my workbook to a four year old and asked her to do the assignment for me.

Despite the lack of precision in the irregular forms I reproduced, I had indeed learned how to recognize the letters of the Greek alphabet. With the help of electronic flashcards, I now knew how to pronounce them with reasonable accuracy, as well.

Having gained this basic level of confidence I've decided to try a slightly unorthodox way of teaching the letters to you. I hope you'll read on and enjoy the process.

Rather than confuse anyone with the differences between the upper and lower case letters, I thought we'd focus on the lower case for this lesson. Let's begin with the first letter of the Greek alphabet which is called Alpha (α). It's name may be Alpha, but it sounds the same as our letter "A" in the word "APPLE". So now you know what an Alpha (α) looks like and even what it sounds like. Pretty simple, right? So, just for fun, what if I spelled the word apple, as α pple? (*Notice the Alpha at the beginning or the word.*) Would you know how to say it? Most likely you would. What if I spelled orange, as α range. Could you spot the Greek letter and pronounce it correctly? Hopefully, you could.

To help make this article a little more interesting than a kindergarten class about the ABC's, what if I start replacing each English letter in the article with a Greek letter that I've just introduced? For example, if I changed **a**ll the "A"s in this sentence to Alpha, could you still **r**ead the sentence? What if we took the next letter in the Greek **a**lphabet, which is called Beta (β) and started replacing **a**ll the "B"s as well. You would know the first two letters of the Greek **a**lphabet, and even though you don't know how to **r**ead Greek you would **b**egin to get **a**n **i**dea of how to recognize and pronounce the Greek letters. Shall I proceed? Good!

Oh no! Here we are just two letters into the Greek alphabet and we're in trouble already – there's no "C" in the Greek alphabet. Instead, it jumps around in comparison to English and includes a letter called Gamma (γ) which sounds like our letter "G". That's pretty easy; even if the order of the letters is a little different, we can still follow along because the fourth and fifth letters fall right back in sequence with Delta (δ) and Epsilon (ϵ). Now things are starting to get interesting!

don't panic! Stay focused. You can do this!

The next three letters in the Greek alphabet are very different from English because we have no direct

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counterpart. They are Zeta (ζ), Eta (η) and Theta (θ). Zeta is pronounced as a slurring of the two English letters “D” and “Z”. Eta is pronounced the same way as the “A” in the word tame. Use caution here, however. You don’t want to confuse the Eta (η) with our letter “N”. So, if I rewrote the earlier sentence it would look like this: Eta is pronounced the same way as the “A” in the word tame. Whew! Did you see where I replaced each long “A” sound with an Eta? The Theta is much easier to remember. It sounds like our “TH”, as in the word three. Or, should it be written three?

Okay, time for a break. Just for a moment I’ll return to normal English and review what we’ve covered:

Greek	Name	English	As in
α	Alpha	A	apple
β	Beta	B	boy
γ	Gamma	G	golf
δ	Delta	D	dog
ε	Epsilon	E	pen
ζ	Zeta	DZ	n/a
η	Eta	A	tame
θ	Theta	TH	three

Since the Greek alphabet has only 24 letters, we are one third of the way through. Is that cool, or what!

And now, back to the fun part...

Once again, Greek returns to letters familiar to our eyes. Next is Iota (ι) and it sounds just like our “I” in the word “PIN”. After that comes Kappa (κ) which has the same sound as our English “K” or our hard “C”. Then it’s on to the Greek letter Lambda (λ) which is pronounced like our letter “L”. Another simple Greek letter follows. It is the letter Mu (μ) and has the identical sound of our letter “M”. Moving on, we come to the Greek letter Nu (ν). Don’t let it confuse you. It may look like our letter “V”, but it is actually similar to our letter “N”.

At this point Greek includes another letter that is not in the English alphabet. This one is called Xi (ξ). The name of the letter is pronounced “ca-see”, and it sounds like the “X” in “AXIOM”.

We’ve covered most of the Greek alphabet already. Just two more letters and we’ll take a break.

The next is an easy letter to learn. The Greek letter is called Omicron (ο) and it sounds just like our “O” in the English word “POT”. The sixteenth Greek letter is Pi (π), but the name isn’t pronounced “PIE” as we’re used to. It is pronounced “PEA” and has the same sound as the English letter “P”.

Fantastic! Back to English for a moment. Sixteen Greek letters and no one has started calling me bad names, yet. Let’s review the second third of the Greek alphabet:

Greek	Name	English	As in
ι	Iota	I	pin
κ	Kappa	K (or hard C)	kite or cat
λ	Lambda	L	lost
μ	Mu (pronounced “mew”)	M	marbles
ν	Nu	N	natty
ξ	Xi (pronounced “ca-see”)	n/a	axiom
ο	Omicron	O	pot
π	Pi (pronounced “pea”)	P	pen

We’re reaching the home stretch. Just eight more Greek letters to go. So it’s back to the fun stuff again.

After Pi comes the Greek letter Rho (ρ). Another confusing letter because it looks like an English letter “P”, but it is really an “R”. Moving along we find the letter Sigma (σ or ς) and it sounds like our letter “S”. When the Sigma appears at the end of a word it looks like θις (ς), and like θις (σ) anywhere else.

At this point you are probably wondering what bizarre

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form of torture I'll unfold next. Don't give up, yet. If you think reading this is hard, try writing it. We have just a handful of letters to go. Tough it out, folks!

With Sigma βεηινδ υς, we καν αδνανσε το θε νεξτ γρεεκ letter which ις καλλεδ Tau (τ). καν you γυεσσ what ενγλιση λεττερ ιτ ις λικε? Υεσ, “T” ις θε κορρεκτ ανσπερ! ανδ, θε λεττερ αφτερ Tau ις ιυστ ας εασυ. ιτ ις Upsilon (υ) ανδ ις νεργυ μυχ λικε ουρ ενγλιση λεττερ “U”.

θε νεξτ θρεε λεττερς αρε νοτ ιν ουρ ενγλιση αλφαβετ, βυτ αρε νοτ θατ χαρδ το λεαρν. Φιστ we have Phi (φ). ας you καν ιμαγινε θε Phi σουνδ ις λικε ουρ “F” or “PH” ιν ενγλιση. θε λεττερ αφτερ Phi ις α βιτ χαρδερ. ιτ ις καλλεδ Chi (χ) ανδ σουνδς α λιττλε λικε α κατ when ιτ σhowς ιτς τεεθ, αρχεσ ιτς βακκ ανδ λετς ουτ α λουδ ηιςς. μονιγ το θε νεξτ το λαστ λεττερ ιν θε γρεεκ αλφαβετ we φινδ Psi (ψ). θις λεττερ σουνδς λικε α κομβινατιον οφ ουρ λεττερς “P” ανδ “S”, ανδ ις σιμιλαρ το θε σουνδ you μακε when you τρυ το γετ σομεονε'ς αττεντιον – “PSST”.

φιναλλυ, we κομε το θε λαστ λεττερ. μοστ πεοπλε αλρεαδυ κνω ιτ, βυτ δον'τ ρεαλιζε where ιτ κομεσ φρομ. θε λεττερ ις καλλεδ Omega (ω), ανδ ιτ σουνδς ιυστ λικε θε “O” ιν “OPEN”.

Hoorah! You made it through all 24 letters in the Greek alphabet. But let's review the last eight before concluding.

Greek	Name	English	As in
ρ	Rho	R	real
σ or ς	Sigma	S (or a soft C)	silver or cement
τ	Tau	T	today
υ	Upsilon	U	cute
φ	Phi	F or PH	first or photograph
χ	Chi	n/a	a cat hissing
ψ	Psi	PS	psst or lips
ω	Omega	O	open

Congratulations! A weaker person would have given up by now, but you stuck it out. Which means you are either my mother or a very interested learner. I hope you actually picked up on the various letters of the Greek alphabet. It isn't all that difficult to learn the letters. But may I remind you that Greek isn't just English with different letters. What we did was to provide a strategy for learning to recognize the letters of the Greek alphabet and beginning to understand how they are pronounced. We did not use any actual Greek words (unless it was coincidental). The challenge occurs when one begins to study the grammar. Real Biblical Greek has capital letters as well as the lower case letters I used. Add to that the accent marks, diphthongs, noun systems, verb systems, participles and the complications increase. I'll leave those lessons to someone better qualified to teach that material.

To wrap things up, let me leave you with a passage from Scripture (Romans 1:7b) in “real” Greek – it is my wish for you. Try to recognize the letters and then use the table below to translate the words.

χαρις υμιν και ειρηνη απο θεου πατροσ ημων και κυριου ιησου χριστου

χαρις = grace	πατροσ = Father
υμιν = to you	ημων = our
και = and	κυριου = Lord
ειρηνη = peace	ιησου = Jesus
απο = from	χριστου = Christ
θεου = God	

See if you can translate this last word on your own.

αμην

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Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar, Second Edition
Copyright 1993, 2003 by William D. Mounce
Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

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