

Englishman's Greek

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Language of the New Testament

1A. The Original Languages of the Bible.

1B. The vast majority of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. There are a few exceptions where certain portions of the Old Testament were written in Aramaic (a language similar to Hebrew).

The portions of the O.T. written in Aramaic are these:

Daniel 2:4-7:28 (Read Daniel 2:4 and see the note in the Scofield Bible.)

Ezra 4:8-6:18 and Ezra 7:12-26

Genesis 31:47 (two words); Jeremiah 10:11

2B. The entire New Testament was written in Greek.

2A. New Testament Greek

1B. History

1C. Classical Greek (also called Attic Greek)

This was the language of Athens in her glory (Plato, Thucydides, Demosthenes).

2C. Hellenization was the adoption of the Greek language and culture by other countries as the result of the conquests of Alexander the Great (4th century B.C.).

3C. The language of the Roman Empire

The Romans conquered the world but they did not suppress the Greek language. The common language of the Roman empire was Greek not Latin (Latin was the official language). The Greek language was freely used and understood throughout the Roman empire, being spoken freely on the streets of Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem and

Athens. It helped to unify the empire because everyone shared the same language.

4C. People living in the Roman empire were bilingual. They all spoke Greek, the common language, and they also each had their local language.

1D. What languages did the Lord speak? The languages of Palestine were Aramaic (the local language) and Greek (the common, universal language of the empire).

2D. See Acts 2:8-11 compared with Acts 2:14

These Jews all spoke their native language but they also could all understand Peter when he preached to them in Greek. Peter wrote 1 and 2 Peter in Greek also. As you would travel around the empire, you might not know a person's native language, but you could still communicate because everyone knew Greek.

3D. The Epistle to the Romans--What language was it written in? Since Paul wrote to the Romans, you might think that he would write in the native Italian language, which back then was Latin. But Paul did not do this. He wrote the Epistle to the Romans in Greek which the people of Rome understood, and which could also be understood by everyone else in the empire.

4D. The superscription on the cross was tri-lingual (John 19:20). 1) Hebrew (actually Aramaic) was the local language of Palestine; 2) Greek was the common, universal language of the empire; 3) Latin was the official (governmental) language of the empire.

2B. Koiné Greek (pronounced Koy-Nay)--A Common Language for the Common Man

1C. The Koiné period was from 300 B.C. to 500 A.D.

2C. What was Koiné Greek?

1D. Compare the Greek word koinonia κοινωνία (1 John 1:3). It is translated "fellowship" and it means "sharing in COMMON." The key idea is "common." Koiné Greek simply means "common Greek."

2D. Koiné Greek was the LINGUA FRANCA of the Roman Empire. Lingua Franca means a language used as the common or commercial tongue among peoples of diverse speech and backgrounds.

3D. Koiné Greek was the normal spoken language of the Roman Empire (compare the word VERNACULAR

which refers to the normal, spoken form of a language, the language used in common discourse).

Koiné Greek was the common language of everyday life. It was the language of ordinary street conversation. It was the common language of the masses, the natural and living language that was used during this period.

4D. Koiné Greek was different from classical Greek, somewhat analogous to the way the English commonly used today is different from Shakespearian English (even the way modern English is different from KJV English). The people of the first century might read Plato's Greek and they could understand it, but they certainly did not speak Plato's Greek at home or in the market place! In a similar way, we could read Shakespeare and understand it somewhat, but we would not use that kind of English in our common communication. There is sometimes a wide gap between the language of literature and the language of everyday living.

5D. God used Koiné Greek as the means through which He communicated His gospel to men. The Bible is an uncommon Book communicated in a common language to common people with a common need for the salvation that is found in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The fact that the gospel message was penned and spoken in Koiné Greek was a huge advantage for the early missionary movement of the first century and beyond. Paul could travel throughout the Roman Empire and could go to various countries without ever having a language problem or without ever needing an interpreter. Everyone could understand the common Greek which Paul preached and which was the language of the New Testament books.

3A. The Old Testament in Greek: THE SEPTUAGINT (abbreviated as LXX).

1B. What was the Septuagint? It was a translation of the Old Testament (from Hebrew to Greek) so that the Jewish people living in Greek speaking countries could understand the Scriptures.

2B. The date of this translation: Approximately 250 B.C. [Note: There are some "KJV Only" advocates who teach that the Septuagint was not completed until **after** the NT books were written, but this theory is totally unfounded and contrary to manuscript evidence.]

3B. This translation was done in Alexandria (Egypt).

4B. The origin of this translation: "Uncertainty is attached to the origin of the LXX, and its beginning is enshrouded in legend. Its alleged seventy-two translators (six from each of the twelve tribes) is traditional, the number seventy

(LXX) apparently being an approximation for seventy-two; or the number seventy may have developed in the course of tradition" (Unger).

5B. The language of the LXX was Koine Greek, the same kind of Greek as found in the Greek New Testament.

6B. The influence of the LXX in the days of Christ: The majority of NT quotations and allusions are from the LXX. The Jews considered it a valuable translation of the Old Testament and they esteemed it highly. The Lord Jesus and the apostles quoted from the LXX (though not always).

7B. The value of the LXX: It is an ancient translation. As such it has been helpful in the science and art of textual criticism as applied to the Old Testament. The LXX also helps in understanding many New Testament words. The meaning of words is determined by usage and as we see how certain words are used in the LXX, this can shed light on the meaning of these same words as they are used in the NT. The LXX also forms a connecting link between the OT and the NT (one complete Bible in the same language).

8B. The limitations of the LXX: No translation is perfect and this is certainly true of the LXX. "Surveying the translation in its entirety, it may be said that it varies in its standard of excellence. The Pentateuch is on the whole a close and serviceable translation. The Psalms, on the other hand, and the book of Isaiah show obvious signs of incompetence" (Unger).

9B. Lessons we can learn from the LXX: 1) No translation made by man is perfect; some are better than others. The LXX is an excellent translation of the first five books, but not so good in other places. 2) Although the LXX was far from perfect, the Lord Jesus used it at times (quoted from it, etc.) and we have no record that He ever condemned it. Perhaps there is a lesson in this for those today who claim that a certain Bible translation is a perfect translation and teach that every other translation should be utterly condemned. Was this really the attitude of the Lord Jesus?

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