
The aim of this book

This book has a single aim:

To help you learn enough Greek to read the New Testament.

This might seem obvious for a book entitled *The Elements of New Testament Greek*. However, there are many books designed for those beginning to study New Testament Greek that do not focus exclusively on this aim. The point will become clearer if I highlight certain things that this book does not aim at.

This book does not set out to present my understanding of New Testament Greek. It is a book for you, not for me. If I want to impress my colleagues with my Greek expertise, I will do that elsewhere. You deserve a book written to help you. In the same way it is not a ‘Greek Grammar’, as if my work was merely to set out Greek grammar, and it is then up to you to understand it and learn it. This is a textbook, written to help you in the process of learning.

This book does not try to teach you Christianity. It assumes that you want to read the New Testament in Greek in order to understand the New Testament better. For many the reason for wanting to understand it better will be a religious motivation, and that is great – I personally share that motivation. But for others it will be different. You may be unsure about Christianity, or indeed negative towards it. Nevertheless if you want to understand the New Testament better by learning Greek, this book is for you. Knowing Greek is a tool. My aim in this book is to help you acquire that tool, not to persuade you to use it in certain ways. The reason for this approach is straightforward: learning Greek takes some effort, and this book has been written to help. And it can help most if it focuses clearly on the task in hand, and does not try to engage in wider issues. In this book you will get help with learning Greek, and nothing else.

This book does not intend to help you feel superior, to initiate you into the ranks of an elite, or to give you ammunition for pointing out the errors of others. Unfortunately, the teaching of Greek often seems to encourage this. Part of this is natural. You are acquiring a valuable new skill that will aid your understanding of the New Testament. You should be proud of this. It should

Cambridge University Press

0521755506 - The Elements of New Testament Greek, Third Edition

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help you see the truth of what the New Testament says more clearly. However, Greek is a language, not a theological weapon. Understanding a language comes slowly. Gradually you will begin to appreciate the difficulties of Bible translators, and see how there are emphases, connections and flavours present in the Greek New Testament that are inevitably lost in translation. There are many riches to be gained from reading the New Testament in Greek. However, if you hope that after four lessons of Greek you will be shown theological secrets undreamt of by those relying on translations, you will be sadly disappointed. Reading the New Testament in Greek rather than in English is like watching a sports game on television rather than hearing it on the radio. Superior in many ways, but the score does not change.

This book does not pretend that you are learning Greek as a modern language, or that you are ‘picking up the language’ as children do. If you were learning Greek to speak it and hear it, you would learn it differently. But you are not. Young children are remarkably successful at learning languages by hearing it all around them and gradually making sense of it. But you are an adult, not a child. And adult learners, in general, want to understand and to make sense of things. After all, they are talented, rational people who are used to understanding what goes on around them. Therefore this book aims to help you progress step by step, explaining how Greek works, and as far as possible highlighting patterns and principles to make sense of what you are being asked to learn. You will not be ‘thrown in at the deep end’ and expected simply to ‘pick it up’.

Finally, the driving force of this book is not for you to have fun. I hope that you will, and you will certainly learn far better if you are enjoying it. However, let us be honest. If you wanted to have fun, you could probably think of many better ways than sitting here reading this book! You are reading this because you want to learn Greek. All Greek teachers struggle with the negative reputation that learning Greek has of being boring, complicated or too difficult. This leads to a great temptation – to sacrifice the goal of people learning Greek upon the altar of ensuring that everyone is happy and that Greek is popular. Thus a well-known phenomenon is for people to enjoy their Greek lessons greatly, but a year later to be no closer to being able to read the New Testament in Greek for themselves than they were at the beginning. My commitment to you is different. Working through this book will not always be easy. But you can rely on the fact that there is nothing in it that is not focused on helping you read the New Testament in Greek, and that when you have mastered what is in the book, you will be able to do just that. I sincerely hope that you do enjoy learning Greek, just as a coach might hope that the athlete enjoys the training sessions. But the real enjoyment for the athlete comes from winning the medal.

How to use this book

As well as having a clear aim, this book has been designed with particular principles in mind that give it a particular shape and structure. You will find the learning process easier if you understand these principles and are aware of the structure.

KEY PRINCIPLE OF SELECTION

In keeping with the title ‘The Elements’ and the aim to ‘learn enough Greek to read the New Testament’, this book does not contain all of the Greek grammar there is to know. Rather it contains all that you need to know to be able to make a good start in reading the New Testament in Greek. There are various irregularities, or rare features of Greek, that are not tackled here: they are best dealt with in context later on when you meet them as you read the New Testament. This book is about equipping you to begin reading the New Testament – you will then improve by practice. The ‘Going Further’ section at the end of the book (page 237) contains ideas on how to build on what you have learnt. For now we need to focus on what is important.

The order in which material is presented has not been chosen at whim or according to some arcane academic tradition. Rather it is arranged according to what occurs most frequently in the New Testament (with slight alterations according to what forms a logical order for learning). This is most apparent in two areas. First, the order in which grammar is introduced has been based on the relative frequency of the different parts of grammar in the New Testament. Thus many teachers may find the leaving of the Passive until Chapter 15 surprising. However, in practice the Passive is rare in Greek. Similarly rare are many of the uses of the Infinitive (Chapter 18). However, the basic use of participles is common in the New Testament, and therefore it is learnt much earlier here than in many books (Chapter 7). Second, the vocabulary presented in this book is the 600 most common words in the New Testament, organised with the most common ones first (although no word will be introduced before you understand

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how to use it). Thus as a learner you can be sure that each step you are asked to make has been chosen to be the most useful next step in the development of your understanding of Greek.

CHAPTERS

There are twenty chapters in this book. Each of these focuses on a particular area of Greek grammar, as you build up your knowledge of the Greek language step by step. Each chapter is designed to be equally challenging. If you can handle the first chapter, you just need to repeat that nineteen more times, and you will be there.

KEY GRAMMAR, HINTS AND ENGLISH GRAMMAR

The major part of the text in each of the chapters is explanation – helping you to understand a particular element of the Greek language. However, at regular intervals throughout the text you will see four different types of box appear, each with a different function.

KEY GRAMMAR

This box contains a brief one-line summary of the point being discussed. Learn and remember these points and you are halfway there.

Hint

This box contains a hint or suggestion to help you with the point being discussed. They do not add to the proper explanation, but rather are an aside – something that might help you remember it or recognise it in practice.

These boxes contain a cross-reference to the comparative guide to English grammar on pages 240–9. This is because Greek is often very similar to English and a pause to think about how something works in English might make the corresponding point in Greek easier to understand.

See it in English



1 Tim. 1.1: Παυλος ἀποστολος Χριστου Ἰησου ...

This marks out quotations from the New Testament, which provide a preview of the grammar point about to be explained in the following section. Many students find that these examples give a useful introduction to what is about to come and provide a ‘fixed point’ they can look back to as they start to learn the detail.

EXERCISES AND PRACTICE

You learn by doing, not just by seeing. Therefore throughout the book there are exercises and practices for you to do. These fall into a number of different categories.

Practice: After each important grammar point in every chapter there is a practice section containing a number of very brief (often one word) questions. These are focused directly on the piece of grammar that has just been explained. Thus the practice questions are aimed at helping reinforce that particular grammar point.

Half-way practice: This occurs at about the mid-point in each chapter, except in the first two. It always consists of twelve short sentences (eight from Greek to English, four from English to Greek) giving an opportunity to consolidate the first half of the chapter before going on to the second part.

Sentences: At the end of each chapter, there are two sets of sentences (Chapter 1 is different since by then we have only learnt the alphabet). Each of these consists of twelve sentences for you to translate (again eight Greek to English, four English to Greek). These sentences have been chosen to help you practise what you have learnt in that chapter (grammar and vocabulary), while also integrating it into what you have learnt in previous chapters.

Thus the practice questions have been specifically created to help you focus on the new thing you are learning, while the exercises help you put this new thing in the context of what has gone before (and help you keep practising what you have already learnt). The sentences themselves are not taken directly from the New Testament – unfortunately it was not written in such a way as to provide enough sentences that only used or practised certain words or points of grammar. However, nor were the sentences simply made up. Instead, as far as possible, they are based on phrases and sentences from the New Testament that have been altered to suit the learning need – for example one word of vocabulary replaced with another. This means that from the beginning you are meeting exactly the sort of Greek that you will find in the New Testament, even if it has been altered to fit the needs of the step-by-step approach. It also means that occasionally you will notice that a sentence does not obey the rules that you have learnt. This will be because the New Testament passage it is drawing on did not follow the rules precisely either – Greek is a language, not a mathematical code. One part of learning a language is understanding which rules are a little flexible and which are not.

If you are interested in where the sentences have been drawn from, a list is provided on pages 330–2. It can be useful to see some of the slightly more unusual phrases in their original context. Of course, you can also practise your New Testament knowledge by trying to guess the source for the sentences. How many can you identify?

You might wonder why you need to translate from English into Greek (you want to read the New Testament, not write it!). Some teachers feel that this is not an important exercise, but many believe that it is only when you try writing some Greek yourself that you really understand how it works.

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Passages: At the end of each chapter (except for the first two) a passage from the New Testament is given, quoted exactly. These have been chosen so that you should be able to translate them. However, there are always odd items that you have not yet met – particularly items of vocabulary. Therefore help is given in brackets [*like this*] throughout these passages. Thus the *sentences* are drawn from the New Testament but have been altered to fit what you know. The *passages* are exact quotations from the New Testament, with some extra help given.

Answers: There are many good reasons for giving the answers to the questions in the back of the book. In particular, it helps you take control of your learning. You can try out the question, and then look and see whether you have got it right. If not, you can then try to work out why. After all, the aim of the exercise is to help you learn, not to demonstrate what you do or do not know. However, as a teacher it can be helpful to be able to set questions to which you know answers are not provided, for then you can see how different learners are progressing and what further guidance they might need. Therefore, answers are provided in the back to the practice questions and to half of the sentences (section A sentences). Also, an answer to the passages can be found in any English Bible. However, no answers are provided to the section B sentences, to give your teacher the opportunity of seeing your unaided work.

VOCABULARY

This book makes use of 600 Greek words. These have been chosen to be the most common words in the New Testament, plus a handful of others that are needed to illustrate important elements of Greek grammar, or that are particularly worth learning. This works out as meaning all of the words that occur at least twenty-three times in the New Testament, plus a handful of others. It may surprise you to learn that these words represent over 90 per cent of all the words in the New Testament. Thus familiarity with these words is an important goal to aim at: learn to recognise these 600 words, and you will recognise 90 per cent of all the words in the New Testament.

Take the following entry in the vocabulary at the end of Chapter 2 as an example:

ἄγγελος (175) – messenger, angel

This means that the Greek word ἄγγελος (pronounced an-gel-os) occurs 175 times in the New Testament and means ‘messenger’ or ‘angel’. The one Greek word overlaps with the meaning of two English words. Which would be the best way to translate it in any given situation would depend on the context. Of course, what is going on underneath is that an angel is a messenger of God, and

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hence it is not surprising that Greek uses the one word with both meanings – a messenger in general, or a messenger of God. You should be aware that it is rare that a word in one language is exactly equivalent to one word in another language. There are often shades of meanings or ‘flavours’ that a word has which the ‘equivalent’ word in the other language does not have. However, you need to walk before you can run. Focus for the moment on learning the ‘basic English equivalent(s)’ of the Greek words you meet. Over time you will gain an appreciation for the particular ‘flavour’ of different Greek words.

Learning words is never easy, but it is important: grammar with no words is dead. You should follow your teacher’s guidance in what he or she wants you to memorise, but the book is designed on the basis that you do learn the vocabulary step by step. If you try to learn too many words all in one go it becomes very difficult, but broken down into weekly or daily portions it is achievable with a bit of determination, and the fact that you know that the word occurs many times in the New Testament can be an encouragement.

A hint for learning vocabulary – you need to engage your whole body in the process, not just your eyes. Staring at the list of words will get you nowhere. Write them out, say them aloud, test your friends; different approaches suit different people, but *do* something, don’t just stare. Also, it is very important to have a system of going back to the words you have previously learnt. As you keep on learning, half forgetting and then revisiting words, they will gradually stick permanently in your mind. Also, after each vocabulary, a number of ‘word helps’ are given, which are words in English that are derived from the Greek words in the vocabulary. For example, the English word ‘agriculture’ can help you remember that the Greek word ἄγρος (pronounced ag-ros) means ‘field’. Your first step in becoming familiar with the vocab should be working out which Greek word these ‘word helps’ relate to. Finally, for a particularly troublesome word, it can be helpful to think of a funny illustration involving the word. For example, to remember that δούλος (doo-los) means ‘slave’, remember that ‘slaves do lots’, or remember προσωπον (pros-oh-pon) meaning ‘face’ by the phrase ‘pour soap on’. Have a competition with your friends for who can think of the best ways of remembering the words.

TWO PATHWAYS

As noted above, this book makes use of 600 Greek words. The first chapter contains eight words that you can understand as soon as you know the alphabet. All of the rest of the chapters contain thirty-two words. The last chapter contains the final sixteen words. One pathway to learning the elements of New Testament Greek using this book is to learn these words chapter by chapter as you progress.

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Some teachers, however, find that thirty-two words in a chapter is too many, given that you are trying to master the grammar as well. Therefore this book contains an alternative pathway, focused around a more limited vocabulary of 390 words. In each vocab list and in the Greek–English dictionary, certain words are marked with an asterisk (e.g. *βαλλω). These are the words that form this more limited group. The practice questions have been chosen so that they use only this more limited vocabulary. The sentences do use all of the words, not just these marked ones (since those taking the other pathway need practice in all the words). However, in each set of sentences at least half of them are marked with an asterisk to indicate that they use only words from the more restricted group. Thus, there are two pathways:

1. Aim at all 600 words, allowing you to do any practice questions and sentences.
2. Just focus on the 390 asterisked words, allowing you to do any practice questions, and those sentences marked with an asterisk (and the others, of course, if you are willing to look up the odd words unfamiliar to you).

DICTIONARIES

At the end of this book there are two dictionaries – one ‘Greek–English’ and one ‘English–Greek’. These dictionaries simply gather together all of the words presented in the vocabularies at the end of each chapter. The entries for ἄγγελος (the example used above) read as follows.

ἄγγελος (175) – messenger, angel 2
 angel (messenger) – ἄγγελος (175) 2
 messenger (angel) – ἄγγελος (175) 2

Notice the number 2 after each of these entries. This tells you that the word is first introduced in Chapter 2. The 175 is the number of times ἄγγελος occurs in the New Testament. Notice also that in the Greek–English dictionary both possible English equivalents are given, and that in the English–Greek dictionary you are reminded of the range of meaning of the Greek word by the mention in brackets of other possible English translations.

GRAMMAR REFERENCE

Towards the end of this book you will find grammar reference tables. For easy reference these gather together in one place material that has been introduced throughout the book.

The history of the Greek language

Greek is a remarkable language. We first have examples of it written down in the thirteenth century BC, and it continues to be written and spoken by millions of Greeks across the world today. Throughout this long history it has changed and evolved in many different ways, but it has always remained Greek. Such developments are not degeneration from best to worst, nor progress from simple to complex. They are simply change. As you embark on your study of Greek, it is useful to understand a little of this history, if only so that you understand what is meant by terms such as ‘classical’ or ‘koine’ or ‘modern’ Greek.

Our first glimpse of Greek is around 1300 BC, because we possess tablets dating to that period written in Greek, though using a different script (called Linear B). We then lose sight of it during the so-called ‘dark ages’ (dark because they have left us no written records) until about the eighth century BC, when we have our first inscriptions using the Greek alphabet. Not long after this the poems of Homer were written down, one of the great glories of the Greek language. By the fifth and fourth centuries BC Athens had grown to be the cultural capital of the Greek world, producing great drama, oratory, history writing and philosophy. Later this was seen as the ‘golden age’ of Greek literature and language – ‘classical’ Greek. The next crucial step came with Alexander the Great, who in ten years conquered all the lands between Greece and India. In his wake came ‘hellenization’ – the spreading of Greek language and culture. While certain aspects of Greek culture caused controversy (for example among some Jews), the language soon became the international language across a huge area. This language was known as ‘common Greek’ (the Greek word for ‘common’ is κοινή – *koine* – so you will hear it called ‘koine Greek’; modern scholars sometimes also call it ‘hellenistic Greek’). This is the language of the New Testament. By the time of Jesus the Romans had become the dominant military and political force, but the Greek language remained the ‘common language’ of the eastern Mediterranean and beyond, and Greek was still seen as the language of culture. However, many writers at this time thought that the normal spoken language of their day was inelegant and so imitated the ‘classical’ Greek of

Cambridge University Press

0521755506 - The Elements of New Testament Greek, Third Edition

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hundreds of years before. On the whole, though, the New Testament texts show little sign of this (except, perhaps, Luke, Acts and Hebrews): they are written in common (koine) Greek, the language of normal people at the time.

Greek continued as the language of the Eastern Roman Empire (the Byzantine Empire) through to its destruction in the fifteenth century AD. Around the same time during the Renaissance in Western Europe, Greek began to be studied by scholars in order to gain access to the great Greek literature of the ancient world, including the New Testament. In the process the idea of two types of Greek – classical and New Testament – was formed, though in fact New Testament Greek is just the standard language of its day and not a separate category. Meanwhile, of course, Greeks continued to speak Greek, throughout their domination by the Empire of the Ottoman Turks, and it became the official language of the new Greek state at its independence in 1821.