

Giuseppe Guarino

NEW TESTAMENT GREEK LESSONS

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How to read Greek

The Greek alphabet is not so different than ours. At the same time, it is clear that it is different enough to cause some problems to us, who are totally depended on the Latin alphabet to write our western languages.

The change of letters from one alphabet into another is called “transliteration.” It is a common practice we find in the New Testament, where many Hebrew words were transliterated (Amen, Hallelujah) into Greek. Also, many Greek (and Hebrew) biblical words have been transliterated and adopted into our language without being actually translated – Baptism, Apostle, etc.

We will use the transliteration process first in a written form – as an exercise. Later it will take place in the mind of the student only. At last, the student will be able to recognize the Greek letters, just like the Latin and be able to read in Greek.

Greek has 24 letters. 17 Consonants. 7 Vowels.

A	α	A	Alpha
B	β	B	Beta
Γ	γ	GH	Gamma
Δ	δ	D	Delta
E	ε	E	Epsilon
Z	ζ	Z	Zeta
H	η	E	Eta
Θ	θ	Th	Theta
I	ι	I	Iota
K	κ	K	Kappa
Λ	λ	L	Lambda
M	μ	M	Mi
N	ν	N	Ni
Ξ	ξ	X	Chi
O	ο	O	Omicron
Π	π	P	Pi
P	ρ	R	Rho
Σ	σ	S	Sigma
ς		S	Sigma end of the word
T	τ	T	Tau
Y	υ	U	Upsilon
Φ	φ	F	Phi
X	χ	Ch	Chi

Ψ ψ    Ps    Psi  
Ω ω    O    Omega

### **Accents and breathings.**

Accents and breathings were not part of the original Greek language. The Alphabet we – and the Greeks – use was officially adopted by the Athenians in 403/402 BC. But accents and breathings were invented by the Hellenized Alexandrians later on. For centuries, writing in Greek manuscripts continued as *scriptio continua*, which means simply that one letter was followed by the other, with no accents, no breathings, no punctuation and all in capital letters.

The critical editions which are in use today will provide every kind of possible help we need to read Greek easily and understand the text with much less difficulties.

I will spare the student the tedious and useless – let me say it – study of accents and breathings, which, without having any knowledge of Greek is truly a nightmare. He or she will easily get used to them and even understand their natural use when growing in the knowledge of the language.

### **How do we read ancient Greek?**

Shakespeare's writings are read today in the only English accent we know: today's. The Old Testament is read by the Hebrews following today's pronunciation. It makes sense, doesn't it?

No-one actually knows how English was pronounced in the XVII century or Hebrew 3000 years ago. No-one knows how Greek was read when Homer wrote his poems.

That is why I strongly suggest that the same principle can be applied to the Bible and it is quite nice to apply modern Greek pronunciation when we read the New Testament too.

It is also true that in academic circles some choose to pronounce Greek differently. It is common practice to adopt the so called *Erasmian* pronunciation, which practically reads word the way they are written following the sounds I listed above when identifying the letters of the Alphabet.

In my course of study, I prefer to make things as easy as possible for the student. This is why we will start with the Erasmian pronunciation, but, in time, we will begin to approach and actually improve the fun – yes, the fun ! – of knowing Greek by understanding it as read my today's Greek native speakers.

**Exercise.** Transliterate the following Greek words (even in print). You can send your work to my e-mail ([guarinous@yahoo.com](mailto:guarinous@yahoo.com)) I will be more than glad to review it.

greco	Traduzione in italiano	Translitterazione
ἡ ζωὴ	Life	E zoe– E ZOE (if you consider the breathing HE ZOE.)
ἡ ἀλήθεια	Truth	E aletheia – E ALETHEIA (HE ALETHEIA)
ἡ ἐντολὴ	Commandament	
γράφω	To write	
Ἀδελφοί	Brothers	
ἡ ἀγάπη	Love	
ἡ σκοτία	Darkness	
καὶ	And	
ψεύστης	Liar	
ὁ θεὸς	God	
ὁ κόσμος	World	
τὸ πνεῦμα	Spirit	
ὁ χριστός	Christ	
ὁ διάβολος	Devil	
Ἀγαπητοί	Beloved	
ἡ νίκη	Victory	
ὅτι	Because	
ἡ καρδιά	Heart	
εἰ	If	
ὅτι	Why	
ὁ ἀντίχριστος	Antichrist	
ὁ υἱός	Son	