

The Pronunciation of Greek

Lately there are some encouraging signs that prospective students of Greek, either of Classical or New Testament Greek, have become aware that the Erasmian pronunciation, which has held undisputed sway in the Western world for hundreds of years, is a fake. Therefore the question of whether they should go over to what they mistakenly call “Modern Greek” pronunciation is now openly discussed and entertained.

This kind of thing is going on, for example, in the Internet chat group called B-Greek. In that list one may read many questions, comments and even advices that betray a remarkable unawareness of the nature and pronunciation of the Greek language. So, while it is encouraging that many who want to learn Greek wonder how they should pronounce it, the teaching and answers they get are often uninformed and misleading.

For example, in such discussions the issue has been polarized between the “ancient Greek pronunciation” and the “modern Greek pronunciation”. In spite of a new and welcome openness to the later phases of the Greek language, there are still vestiges of a bygone day’s prejudice against the Greek pronunciation—which has no historical justification. This often finds expression in the strenuous efforts of some teachers of Greek who no longer dare commend the Erasmian pronunciation(s) as a viable solution, since it has been thoroughly discredited (not least by the present Author’s work), and who, instead, seek to substitute various compromises between the Erasmian and the Greek pronunciations, thus trying to salvage as much of Erasmus’ error as possible. This hybrid concoction is simply a wistful construction without basis in the history of Greek speech. One might almost say that it appears to be the effusion of the last remnants of resentment against the Greek pronunciation, when

the Erasmian pronunciation “is dying the death of a thousand qualifications”.

A disturbing factor about such teachers of Greek is that they dare teach and advice on Greek pronunciation without ever having worked with the evidence bearing on this subject. Their advice is based simply on what they would like to believe, not on the actual pronunciation in ancient times. Of the latter they can have no idea apart from the study of the inscriptions (and the papyri), and since they have not undertaken such a study, their opinion is worthless.

Because we do not have any voice recordings of ancient Greek, our basic guide is to study the orthographic (spelling) mistakes of the ancients, since these divulge to us the way they pronounced their language. They wrote as they heard. For example, if they wrote the word “eipen” as “ipen”, we should conclude that “ei” was pronounced identically or similarly to “i”, otherwise the two would not have been confused. These mistakes are recorded on monuments of stone and marble and remain to this day as they were written from the VII century B.C. on. In these inscriptions and the later papyri we have the best guide to the pronunciation of Greek.

The evidence for the above statements is immense. It comes down to us in tens of thousands of inscriptions and papyri. The present author has examined these materials and put the results of his investigation succinctly in a long article entitled “The Error of Erasmus and Un-Greek Pronunciations of Greek” published in *Filologia Neotestamentaria*, 1995. This was essentially the first serious study on the question of pronunciation since the heated discussion of the nineteenth century. This material has been expanded by about 80% and included as ch. Six in the present author’s book, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament. Morphology*,

Syntax, Phonology, and Textual Transmission, (WUNT 167)
Tübingen: Mohr, 2004, xx + 732 pp.

Here we must remember that there are two issues about pronunciation: one, the phonetic value of the various letters, that is, how each letter or diphthong or digramma sounded. The other is the intonation, that is, the fluctuation of sound as syllables, words, and clauses were uttered. This intonation is unrecoverably lost to us, because it could not be recorded on stone. The sound values of the various letters, however, on account of their interchange with other letters or combinations of letters exhibiting identical or similar sound value, have been preserved for us, and today we can know how the ancients pronounced them! This is the kind of Greek pronunciation that we are talking about.

Before the time of the inscriptions—which become frequent from the seventh century B.C. on—we have no evidence about how Greek was pronounced. But from the time when the first inscriptions appear we become aware that the pronunciation is anything but Erasmian.

Investigation in the inscriptions shows quite clearly that the pronunciation of the various letters and combinations of letters received its definitive sound very early and that it was in concert with the establishment of the final and definitive form of the Greek alphabet. This alphabet, which was in use for a longer period of time, was finally ratified in Athens in 403 B.C. and ever since (till the present day, that is 2408 years) the Greek language has had the same 24 letters, the same five-vowel sounds that are witnessed already in Mycenaean times (Linear B tablets), and the same spelling! For example, the pronunciation of “ei” as “i” is evidenced already in inscriptions from the sixth century B.C. “AI” was pronounced as “e” (as in ‘met’ not ‘mete’) already in the fifth century B.C. Naturally, this was a relatively slow process, not least because Hellas was divided into many sovereign states and each one had its own

traditions and customs. However, here we are thinking in the first place of Athenian (Attic) pronunciation, since this dialect was the most prominent of all influencing the course of Greek ever since. But even in Athens the changes were probably not completed in one night. For some letters, actually, the process appears to have taken centuries to be completed. But this is of no consequence. What is important is not when the last traditionalists died out (that is, if there were such), but when the first innovators introduced the new pronunciation! (again, if this was really a new pronunciation). The evidence forces on us the conclusion that all changes had been introduced before the close of the classical period.

I mentioned above a certain polarization in discussions on Greek pronunciation between the so-called “ancient Greek pronunciation” and “modern Greek pronunciation”. There is, indeed, a polarization but not between ancient and modern Greek pronunciation, but between the un-Greek, unnatural, Erasmian counterfeit and the *Historical Pronunciation of Greek*. Nothing betrays greater ignorance in a would-be classicist or NT scholar than to speak of “the modern Greek pronunciation”. The fact is that there is no such thing as a modern Greek pronunciation. The pronunciation used in Hellas today is the pronunciation that inscriptions show to be taking shape already in the sixth century B.C. as the language evolved naturally, unforcedly, continuously. Greek history knows of no breaks in pronunciation. The Greek language has been continuously used and the pronunciation has been handed down from generation to generation. The way the various letters and diphthongs are pronounced today is witnessed already in classical and generally pre-Christian times. Thus here we are concerned not with a ‘modern Greek pronunciation’ but with the *Historical Pronunciation of Greek*. It is historical, because it took shape as a historical process and because this process started 26 centuries ago and it is not a modern product.

The options for the modern non-Hellenic student of Greek are therefore two. Either he/she continues to follow his/her teacher who learned to pronounce Greek according to the error of Erasmus, in which case he/she will be reading Greek as if it were Latin, or else they should scrap the Erasmian counterfeit and learn to pronounce Greek according its own natural, unforced, and authentic way. Then Greek will become truly pleasing and exciting! The student is advised, therefore, not to go for phonetic helps, but for the real, living voice. And here again, if one wants to learn the very best accent (intonation), one would be advised to seek a good mentor from the great centers of mainland Greece.

The advantages of the *Historical Greek Pronunciation* are obvious. Not only will the student be learning the natural pronunciation of the language (as we do with all foreign languages), but the study of Greek will be greatly facilitated. Having got over the initial hurdles of the new sounds (that are different to English), students will find that they will be able to read and to learn faster; reading (aloud! — like the ancients) will become a pleasure. Instead of syllabizing incoherent and jerky sounds trying to joint them together into a word, a phrase, or a sentence in the jolted Erasmian way, they will discover that they will be pronouncing the language smoothly, naturally, and with a graceful spontaneity. It must be underlined that Greek pronunciation is actually far easier than English, *i.a.* because it only has five-vowel sounds, and their pronunciation is always constant. The process of learning will be facilitated: words and phrases will become meaningful, understandable, easy to learn and to remember.

The application of the *Historical Greek Pronunciation* will facilitate the student's getting an insight into the modern phase of the language, which can only be an extra boon to the learner. He will be able to communicate with the people when visiting Hellas. But he will also find that much of the wording and

diction of the New Testament is still alive in the modern phase of the language. New light will be thrown on the Greek of the New Testament and many text-critical problems will get their solution, as has been amply illustrated in my book, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament*.

The student will also find that the door will open to the Byzantine and Mediaeval periods and their rich literature.

Finally, the student will be reading Paul practically in the way in which Paul had spoken! It will be an authentic pronunciation, an authentic encounter.

The transition is not as difficult as it may seem. A few hours of concentrated work should acquaint anyone with the basic rules of pronunciation. And a few days of reading with the Greek pronunciation, will ensure the required proficiency. I can bear witness that as a teacher of New Testament Greek, I taught it in the Erasmusian way for twenty-four and one half years. When in 1995 I had finished my research on the inscriptions and papyri and written my study on "The Error of Erasmus", I announced to my students that scientific honesty demanded that assured scholarly results should be put into practice. Respect for scientific research and scientific gains made it incumbent on me to abandon the Error of Erasmus. Therefore, from that time on I would use in the classroom only the *Historical Greek Pronunciation*. The students actually found it exciting, and though I made it quite clear to them that no demand was being made on them to exchange their Erasmusian pronunciation for the Historical Greek Pronunciation, they were eager to do so of their own accord. It was beautiful to hear them read Greek in the Greek way!



For the sake of those who wanted to learn the *Historical Greek Pronunciation*, I produced a brief but adequate course with all the necessary rules, texts and voice animation. [See CD for Pronunciation.](#)