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Learning New Testament Greek at a Distance

Ian M. MacNair

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I am indebted to my colleague Steve Motyer for the title of this article. It began as a paper for a research seminar based on my experience of writing a distance learning course, *Reading the Greek New Testament*. But, as Steve pointed out, everyone who tries to learn New Testament Greek today is learning at a distance, whatever the method, distanced by centuries of time and an exasperating ignorance of all the nuances of spoken Greek in the Hellenistic era.

I warm to the words which introduce the excellent little volume, *A Beginner's Reader-Grammar for New Testament Greek* by E. C. Colwell in collaboration with E. W. Tune:

It is a commonplace in our profession that no teacher of introductory New Testament Greek is ever satisfied with the textbook available. He almost always writes one of his own. If and when it is published, however, it turns out to differ from others solely in matters of terminology or of minor adjustment of the major parts of the individual lessons. If there is to be real improvement, the new texts of the future must differ radically from the present crop.¹

Colwell and Tune's book presents one possible divergence, though it does not have all the answers.

There have been enormous strides forward in the teaching of modern languages, advances both in presentation as well as technique, which make most New Testament Greek textbooks look very outdated indeed. Where are we going wrong and how can things be put right?

The traditional approach is illustrated in *The Elements of New Testament Greek* by J. W. Wenham.² In many ways it compares favourably with other books of the same kind. It is well organized, with an excellent reference section; it is always legible, even though it does not come anywhere near the illustrated splendour of most modern language primers. However it has several drawbacks, which are typical of the current market.

First, the approach is grammatical, involving the use of the technical terms of grammar, both English and Greek. Nouns, adjectives and pronouns have case, number and gender. Verbs have tense, mood and voice as well as person and number. Participles have case, number, gender, tense and voice. When you put the flesh around this skeleton, the whole thing becomes extremely complicated. Students spend

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months learning the regular verb, only to find that the number of regular verbs they will encounter can be counted on the fingers of one hand. There are rules of Greek grammar, of which the most important is this: To every rule there is an exception, even this one! The introduction to chapter 16 of Wenham's book illustrates this approach:

¹ E. C. Colwell with E. W. Tune, *A Beginner's Reader-Grammar for New Testament Greek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 9.

² Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965.

Prepositions do not, strictly speaking, 'govern' the cases of the nouns which they precede. The case is really the governing element in the expression; the preposition only serves to make clear the exact sense in which the case is used. This, at least, was true in the earlier history of the language, but as the language developed the prepositions mastered the cases. As the horse in the fable called in the man to help him against the stag, and allowed him to get on his back, so the cases called in the help of the prepositions, and then found themselves weakened or even destroyed. Nevertheless, it is important and helpful to try to understand as fully as possible the basic idea of the cases, for it at once brings together in an intelligible way uses which at first seem arbitrary.³

Without wanting to be cruel to John Wenham, for whom I have the greatest respect, it has to be said that I can guarantee the biggest laugh from my classes each year with that paragraph—but a rather nervous, insecure laugh in some ways. As Colwell and Tune point out, the modern student lacks a knowledge even of English grammar and possesses little or no grammatical vocabulary.

Notwithstanding that fact, a lack of grammatical expertise does not hinder the average reader from understanding books, newspapers and other media communications. When you read the daily paper you don't ask, 'Where is the verb? Now, where is the subject? Does it have an object, an indirect object?' No, the text contains embedded signals, clues to the meaning, which we have come to recognize by practice. When you learn a modern language you learn it in structured units, not by a grammatical analysis. All of us have learned our native language at a very early age and with absolutely no knowledge of grammar. It must be possible to identify the signals which Greek uses and train the learner to recognize and interpret them. This is why Colwell and Tune are so right to focus the student's energies on *reading text*.

Sadly we don't have the vocabulary to use. New Testament Greek as a spoken language, but the equivalent activity is reading the text. When we do so, we frequently discover the not surprising fact that the New Testament writers seem to be unaware of the 'rules' so fervently taught by modern grammarians.

My second complaint with traditional grammars is that the approach is bilingual. The student must learn to translate from English to Greek as well as from Greek to English. The result is a weird pseudo-language

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which would probably have been incomprehensible to a native user of Koine.

Third, the examples and exercises are almost exclusively artificial. Not only are students expected to compose something which is not real language, the material written in Greek to be translated into English is little better. There is little motivation in such sentences as these: 'Does she judge words? You are seeking a world. Does the Son of God seek heaven? Another child throws himself into the sea. They know about clothes from the teaching of the book. The virgins who were eating the bread were not judging themselves.' Even Colwell and Tune introduce their readers to an artificially constructed Greek of their own making.

It is an accepted principle in the teaching of modern languages to adults that course materials should respect the learner. People learn best when they find the material interesting and

³ Wenham, *Elements*, 64.

relevant. This is a factor which seems strangely to have eluded the teachers of New Testament Greek. The thing which will motivate and excite students is to get into the text of the Greek New Testament itself as early as possible.

Some argue that that is impossible; the Greek of the New Testament is too difficult for a beginner. I disagree. A book like 1 John contains sentences and structures that are relatively easy to follow. Thinking again of how we learn our native language at an early age, the input we receive contains very simple words and phrases, but we are also bombarded by a stream of full-blown adult competence, and educators have realized that that exposure to 'untidy input' is just as important for the learning process as the 'tidy input' of baby phrases and simple one-word identifications. It is never too soon for an adult learner of New Testament Greek to be exposed to the real thing.

Wenham's approach, which is not untypical, is like a painter dividing a canvas into 44 squares, which he then proceeds to paint one by one, each in complete detail. By the halfway stage, half the painting is finished but the other half is completely empty. What is needed is an outline in broad strokes using the whole canvas, so that the shape of the final picture is emerging right at the start. The fine details can be added later.

My final criticism of the traditional approach is that it is adversarial. Writers of New Testament Greek Grammars seem to delight in making the subject as difficult as possible, providing exercises that are filled with every imaginable type of linguistic booby trap, destined to produce in the student feelings of failure and discouragement. Where a teacher takes in exercises to mark there may be a time lapse of twenty-four hours or more. During this time it is the wrong answers which are in the student's mind and which are being reinforced deep in the subconscious. Such an approach is excellent for *testing* Greek but a disaster for teaching it. What is needed is a thorough reinforcement of what is correct before it is tested so comprehensively.

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Wenham's *Elements of New Testament Greek* was first published in 1965 and has remained substantially unchanged in subsequent editions. Have more recent writers done better?

Learn to Read the Greek New Testament by Ward Powers was published in 1979.⁴ This sounds promising, and it almost fulfils that promise, but the sub-title of the book gives it away: 'an approach to New Testament Greek based on linguistic principles'. Not only is it a course in grammar, but in phonetics as well. In the introduction to consonants in the first chapter we find this mind-stretching section.

The continuants can be released either through the mouth or the nose. If released through the mouth, the continuant can be made as a hissing noise (called a *sibilant*, the 's' sound) or by putting your mouth in one of the three 'place' positions and making an 'h' sound (which will give you the three *aspirates*) or as a combination by adding the 's' sound to the stop consonant in each of the three 'place' positions (which will give you the three 'double' consonants but note that two of these are unvoiced and one is voiced). There are also two 'liquid' sounds which can be made in the mouth, the oral liquids ('l' and 'r'). If the continuant is released through the nose, this produces three *nasal liquids*...⁵

⁴ Jointly published-Sydney: Anzea Publishers/Exeter: Paternoster Press/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

⁵ Powers, *Learn to Read the Greek New Testament*, 19.

But do we really need all this to read the Greek New Testament? Do we really need to know about all those continuants released through the nose, producing nasal liquids?

Basic Greek in 30 Minutes a Day by Jim Found was published in 1983.⁶ Apart from the obvious flaw in the marketing pitch (it doesn't tell you how many days!) this book does not give enough attention to discourse. It is still a patchwork of grammatical scraps.

In 1988 John Dobson's *Learn New Testament Greek*⁷ came onto the market. This book exchanges an over-systematic approach for an unsystematic approach. It is a meandering journey through difficult country with a poor map. He does give attention to issues of translation, but for me that is not enough to overcome the other drawbacks, chief of which is the insistence on using artificial Greek for the examples and exercises.

John Barfield's *Enjoying the Greek New Testament*⁸ is the most recent offering. It has a wonderful title, but in the edition which I bought, this slim volume is marred by misprints. Its main defect is its concentration on individual words rather than discourse. It is the 'Ladybird' edition of Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

So what is the answer? Several suggestions can be made.

- 1 Avoid the technical terms of grammar as far as possible.
- 2 Work towards recognition rather than memorization.
- 3 Concentrate exclusively on Greek to English.
- 4 Use authentic texts from the New Testament itself which motivate

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the learner. Encourage the learner to 'listen' to the language rather than analyze it grammatically.

- 5 Explain concepts as they arise, but saying only as much as the learner needs to know at that point. For example, it is a short step from ὁ λυων, ὁ φιλων, ὁ ἀγαπων.

- 6 Build confidence by giving as much information as is needed, and allowing the learners to check their own progress.

- 7 Create opportunities for the learner to be actively involved in the learning process in a way that is stimulating and obviously relevant. That will mean reading, writing, speaking, discussing, making choices, and applying what has been learned. It means moving from the question 'what?' to the question 'so what?' Grammatical analysis is not the end of the road. To know that something is a perfect participle passive answers the question 'what?' but what difference does that make? What information does it give us that we could not have picked up from an English translation? That is the 'so what?'

⁶ Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1983.

⁷ Swindon: Bible Society, 1988.

⁸ The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1990.

I do not write as one who has all the answers but as one who feels he has been guided towards some of the right questions. It remains to be seen whether my own attempts at ploughing a fresh furrow will be successful, but I don't regret having a go. I hope this article will stimulate others in this field to apply their energies to producing learning tools that do justice to the importance of the Greek New Testament—the most influential book in our world!

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