

Chapter 1

The Greek Alphabet

1.1 The pronunciation of Koine (koy-nay) (Common) Greek at the time of the New Testament is a matter of debate. The system given here is an adaptation of the pronunciation sometimes referred to as Erasmian, recommended by the Classical Association.

1.2 The Letters and their sounds

	Capital	Small	Pronunciation	
			κοινή	modern Greek
Alpha	Α	α	a as in cat	ah as in father
Beta	Β	β	b as in big	v as in vim
Gamma (1)	Γ	γ	g as in get	"y" or "gyh"
Delta	Δ	δ	d as in dog	th as in then
Epsilon (2)	Ε	ε	e as in get	e as in get
Vau or Digamma (3)	Ϝ	ϝ		
Zeta	Ζ	ζ	dz as in adze	z as in zoo
Eta	Η	η	ey as in grey	ee as in see
Theta	Θ	θ	th as in thin	th as in thin
Iota (4)	Ι	ι	i as in it	ee as in see
Kappa	Κ	κ	k as in kick	k as in kick
Lambda	Λ	λ	l as in let	l as in let
Mu	Μ	μ	m as in man	m as in man
Nu	Ν	ν	n as in no	n as in no
Xi	Ξ	ξ	x as in taxi	x as in taxi
Omicron (5)	Ο	ο	o as in got	or as in lord
Pi	Π	π	p as in pie	p as in pie
Koppa (6)	Ϟ	ϟ	k as in kick	
Rho (7)	Ρ	ρ	r as in red	r as in very
Sigma (8)	Σ	σ or ς	s as in sit	s as in sit
Tau	Τ	τ	t as in tag	t as in tag
Upsilon (9)	Υ	υ	u as in put	ee as in see
Phi	Φ	φ	f as in fie	f as in fie
Chi (10)	Χ	χ	ch as in loch	hu as in human
Psi (11)	Ψ	ψ	ps as in tips	ps as in tips
Omega (12)	Ω	ω	o as in home	or as in lord

Notes :

(1) Gamma : when gamma is combined with other gutturals, γγ, γκ, γξ, γχ the γ is pronounced as the "n" in sing, ink, sinks, etc.

(2) Epsilon : the name means "simple e"

(3) Digamma : the letter dropped out of use before the time of the New Testament.

It was used originally for a "w" or "fw" sound. The name "Vau" reflected its Semitic name.

Greeks called it Digamma because it looked like two superimposed Gammas.

(4) Iota : note that the Greek letter does not have a dot over it.

Before other vowels, ι can sound as "y" in yes

(5) Omicron : the name means "little o"

(6) Koppa : the letter dropped out of use before the time of the New Testament

(7) Rho : at the beginning of a word rho is aspirated : "hr"

(8) Sigma : terminal sigma (at the end of a word) is written ς. Some textbooks for Classical Greek use the form Ϸ for terminal sigma.

- (9) Upsilon : the name means "simple u"
 (10) Chi : ch as in (Scots) loch, (German) ach, (Spanish) gente. Needs some saliva in the back of the throat
 (11) Psi : sounds like a cat spitting
 (12) Omega : the name means "big O"

1.3 Comparison with the English Alphabet

You may find it easier to learn the order of the Greek Alphabet if you compare it to the English Alphabet. C and G were originally forms of the same letter. In Latin, Caius and Gaius are variant spellings of the same name.

Digamma is included in the table because it corresponds to the English letter F. It is of importance for studying Homer, because words which originally started with a digamma may influence the length of a syllable and hence the meter of the poetry.

The original "dz" sound was not used in English, so the letter was dropped from the English alphabet. When the English Alphabet was formalized, there was need for a letter for the "z" sound, so Z was added to the end of the alphabet.

Eta gave us the English "h" and has the sound of "ai" in "Aitch" - we will meet this again in the next chapter.

Ways to remember the sequence ζ - η - θ - ι are by the fake Greek word ζηθι or "Zebras ate thin Indians."

English I and J were originally the same letter. The split occurred in the seventeenth century - I is the form used before a consonant, and J the form used before a vowel.

Xi dropped out of use in Latin, and so never made it into English. The letter "X" for the "ks" sound was added to the end of the English alphabet later.

Koppa is included in the table because it corresponds to the Semitic Qoph, which gave the English "Q"

The Semitic alphabet ends with Tau - the Greeks added the extra letters for sounds peculiar to their own language.

U and V were originally the same letter - U was used before consonants, V before vowels.

The sequence φ - χ - ψ is probably best remembered by use of a mnemonic such as "Fat Cow Psychology"

1.4 Writing the Letters

You will probably write Greek by hand in order to make notes for yourself or for others to read - so it is good to learn to write the letters clearly.

The handwritten forms of most of the letters look like the fonts used for printing, but there are a couple of tricky letters, and a few things to watch out for so that your writing will be easy to read.

α and **β** - start the alpha at the top right, the beta at the bottom left, below the line. I find it easier to write the upright stroke of the beta slanting slightly towards the right.

γ - most fonts make the gamma look like a "y". I prefer to make the loop a bit more visible. The loop descends below the line.

δ - you can start either from the central loop, or from the top curl - whichever is easier.

ε - I like to write epsilon with two strokes, a curve and a short straight horizontal line - the resulting letter is a bit clearer to read.

ζ - start at the top, make a small loop and then a sweeping curve. The ending hook descends below the line.

η - start at the top left and make the first short leg, then add the second curve and leg. The second leg descends below the line. I find it easier to let the letter slope slightly to the right.

θ ι κ λ - are easy. Note that there is no dot on the iota.

μ - I like to start with a long sloping leg below the line, to make a clear distinction between a mu and an upsilon.

ν - Make the "nu" narrow, and pointed at the bottom, to make a clear distinction between it and an upsilon.

ξ - xi is probably the trickiest. It helps to remember that the capital letter is two long horizontal lines with a shorter horizontal line between them, outlining an "X" shape. The handwritten letter does indicate these three lines, but writes them as two narrow loops and the line which then curves back on itself.

ο π ρ σ ζ τ - I like to start the rho with a long sloping stem to distinguish it from omicron and sigma. The vertical stroke of the tau ends in a hook.

υ - upsilon needs to be well-rounded, particularly at the base, to distinguish it from nu

φ χ ψ ω - I find it easier to write a slanting line through the phi and psi. The first stroke of the chi is slightly curved.

1.5 Practice

Using a blank sheet of paper, or the Alphabet worksheet (Appendix A.1), write out each letter of the Greek Alphabet, 50 times each, saying the name and sound of each letter aloud as you write it.

e.g. "Alpha . . ah, Alpha . . ah, . . .

Do this drill until your hand, eye, tongue, ear, and brain respond automatically to the shape and sound of the letters.

1.6 Vocabulary

The Vocabularies will show where the accents come on the words. Learn to put a stress on the accented syllable when learning the word and saying it aloud, but at this stage do not include it when writing or typing - you have enough to do to learn the letters at present.

Read, write, and learn the names :

Βαρναβᾶς	Barnabas
Λάζαρος	Lazarus
Μάρθα	Martha
Μαρία	Mary, Maria
Μαριάμ	Miriam, Mary (<i>"Miriam" is the Anglicized version of the Hebrew "Mar-yam"</i>)
Μᾶρκος	Mark
Πέτρος	Peter
Πιλάτος	Pilate
Σίμων	Simon
Τιμόθεος	Timothy
Τίτος	Titus
Φίλιππος	Phillip