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**THE CASE FOR**

**MODERN PRONUNCIATION OF**

**BIBLICAL LANGUAGES**

GARY G. COHEN AND C. NORMAN SELLERS

*In the majority of Christian educational institutions today artifi-*

*cial pronunciations for NT Greek and OT Hebrew are used--often*

*attempts at a recreation of the true ancient sounds. However, Modern*

*Greek and Modern Hebrew voicings are in reality the most effective*

*ways to teach these ancient biblical tongues. This is especially so*

*because within the last forty years (a) audio-visual teaching aids have*

*become available so that NT Greek can be taught as a living language,*

*and (b) OT Hebrew is actually living again in Israel and can now be*

*mastered with a new thoroughness. One difficulty is that the current*

*generation of teachers was trained in the "older" pronunciations*

*themselves and are thus hesitant to make such a change.*

\* \* \*

INTRODUCTION

EVERY foreign language offers unique learning experiences to those

who study it. Often these experiences are only indirectly related

to the actual study of the language and include the understanding

and appreciation of their cultures, modes of thinking, and a general

broadening of intellectual horizons.

Students of NT Greek sometimes encounter statements such as

"Say something in Greek," which are often the cause for some em-

barrassment and bring into focus certain problems with pedagogical

methodology often used in the study of ancient foreign languages.

How to respond to such a request is particularly a problem for the

student of NT Greek or OT Hebrew. The student might decline by

explaining that NT Greek is studied only for translation purposes,

not for conversation. But this sounds strange to anyone acquainted

with the study of modern foreign languages, and one must wonder

about a teaching method which prepares a student to verbalize little

more than a list of words from his grammar book or the Greek NT,

to say nothing of auditory comprehension or composition.

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And it is not only the Greek student who is at a verbal or

auditory loss. Even after years of working with the language, and

after having mastered the translation and exegesis of the NT, many

Greek scholars would be incapable of communicating on the streets

of Athens on the basis of their NT Greek knowledge alone.

This raises several serious questions: Have the scholars of biblical

languages always been content with translation alone? Have they

always neglected the learning of the language in a way that would

enable them to communicate with native speakers so as to benefit

from the native intuition of usage and syntax?

And what about students of biblical Hebrew? Is it not possible

that even more than in the case of Greek, Modern Hebrew offers

students an opportunity to understand their Hebrew Bibles better? Is

it not possible that the pedagogical methodology of American biblical

languages teachers is past due for extensive revision?

As A. T. Robertson said, "this is indeed a knotty problem and

has been the occasion of fierce controversy."l It is not the intention of

the writers to feed this controversy, but it does seem that something

needs to be said today in defense of treating NT Greek and OT

Hebrew as older dialects of languages which are still living today.

HISTORICAL METHOD

Invariably, when the subject of Greek pronunciation is broached,

this is the question: How did native speakers during the apostolic

period pronounce it? Robertson wrote that "we may be sure of one

thing, the pronunciation of the vernacular was not exactly like the

ancient literary attic [classical] nor precisely like the modern Greek

vernacular, but veering more toward the latter.”2 Howard recognizes

the complicating factor of dialects when he observes that "it is prob-

able that considerable differences existed between the Greek of Rome

and Asia, Hellos and Egypt.”3

It is generally recognized that it is impossible to reconstruct pre-

cisely the pronunciation system of 1st century Greek speakers. And as

a result some have preferred a reconstructed classical [attic] pronun-

ciation, while others have preferred to use a real pronunciation that is

capable of being tested by actual first-hand observation, the pro-

nunciation of Modern Greek.

It is Erasmus (1466-1536) who is generally credited with formu-

lating the reconstructed classical pronunciation, generally popular in

1 A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of*

*Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1923), 236.

2 Ibid., 239.

3 lbid., 41-42.

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the West today. At about the same time Reuchlin (1455-1522) intro-

duced the Byzantine (modern) pronunciation in Western Europe.

The debate over the relative merits of these two systems became

so heated in Cambridge in 1542 that "it was categorically forbidden

to distinguish ai from e or ei and oi from i, under penalty of expul-

sion from the Senate, exclusion from the attainment of a degree,

rustication for students, and domestic chastisement for boys.”4

But in the end it was Erasmian pronunciation that won the day

in the West.

*Comparison of the Two Systems*

One might think that the differences between the two systems are

very large, but they are in fact less different than they are similar.

There are only six letters of the alphabet in which there are

pronunciation differences:

Erasmian Modern

β b -boy v -victory

γ g -got g -got, but also y before ε, as in yet

δ d -dog th -the

ζ dz -ads z -zoo

η a -late ee -feet

The larger differences are found in the pronunciation of the

diphthongs, among which only ου is pronounced the same in both

systems. The differences are:

Erasmian Modern

ει a –late/i -ice ee -feet

οι oi -oil ee -feet

υι uee -queen ee -feet

αι ai -aisle e -let

ιυ eu -feud ev or ef (depending on the following sound)

αυ ow -cow av or af (depending on the following sound)

In addition to these differences, two consonant clusters vary

between the two systems:

ντ nt -sent nd -send

(ἐντολή = entolē) (endolē)

μπ mp -lamp b -biscuit

It is clear, then, that except for the diphthongs and these conso-

nant clusters, there is little difference between the two systems of

pronunciation.

4 Ibid., 237.

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Since one cannot reconstruct precisely the 1st-century pronuncia-

tion of NT Greek, one must make his decision about the system he

will use based on the relative merits of each. The Erasmian system is

based on the principle that each letter should be pronounced as dif-

ferently as possible from every other letter. This is its chief peda-

gogical advantage for beginning students, even though it is obviously

phonetically naive. The similarity between Erasmian β and English

"b" is pedagogically more simple to teach than the modern phono-

logical value, "v." The same is true of αι and English ai in "aisle."

Thus, if the student is not expected to speak to anyone in Greek, the

relative ease with which the transition from English to Greek can be

made is advantageous. But the advantage is very small indeed if in the

process the student is giving up the possibility of learning to speak

and hear the language--something which every modern foreign lan-

guage teacher would consider a *sine qua non*. It is not a great burden

to learn the extra few sounds necessary to make the transition from

English to Modern Greek pronunciation as opposed to Erasmian

pronunciation. After all, there are considerable differences between

English and either system which must be mastered in any event. The

supposed advantage of Erasmian pronunciation shrinks even further

when it is realized that there is no unanimity even among Erasmians

about how some of the consonants and vowels are to be pronounced.

For example, ει is long ā to some and long ī to others; o (omicron) is

long ō to some and short o to others.

There are other more obvious advantages to using Modern Greek

pronunciation. One of these is that the student is learning the sounds

of a living language. A knowledge of the modern pronunciation will

make it possible for the student to converse with native speakers,

whether in his own country or abroad, and this will be a great source

of encouragement as he struggles to master the rudiments of the

language.

Another advantage of the modern pronunciation is that it makes

it possible for the student to use a number of audio materials now

becoming available. Spiros Zodhiates, for example, has produced

cassette tapes of Machen's vocabularies and exercises, as well as both

the Koine NT and Modern Greek NT. Those who have actually

gained thinking, speaking, hearing, and composition facility in a

second language will recognize immediately that such kinds of audio

aids are invaluable.

Yet another advantage of the Modern Greek pronunciation is

that it makes much more possible an approach (however slight at

first) toward the acquisition of language intuition. Native intuition it

may never become, but the constant hearing and speaking of a real

pronunciation system will undoubtedly facilitate a better intuition for

semantic range and grammatical nuance.

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*Should One Change?*

The circumstances today are much different from the time of

Erasmus and even A. T. Robertson. Access to study opportunities in

Greece is easier and audio materials such as easily duplicated cassettes

are more readily available. In light of the advantages of the modern

pronunciation and the easy access to modern Greek materials as well

as native speakers of Modem Greek, there seems to be no compelling

reason to retain the Erasmian pronunciation system.

HEBREW PRONUNCIATION

Many of the arguments in favor of Modem Greek pronunciation

apply to the employment of Modem Hebrew pronunciation as well.

But there are some differences.

Hebrew is a Semitic language, is read from right to left, and has

gutteral sounds not regularly utilized by speakers of English. Its

alphabet is radically different from the Latin alphabet of English, and

Hebrew words cannot be readily associated with English vocabulary

for easy memorization. In general the mastery of Hebrew seems to

procede more slowly than Greek, and its biblical. literature is much

more voluminous (about 70% of the Bible) as well as more varied.

Professors of Hebrew, therefore, even more than those of Greek,

must try hard to find teaching methods which produce good results.

Some components which have proven to be highly successful in teach-

ing Hebrew are:

1. Adoption of the modem Israeli pronunciation.

2. Utilization of modern audio and video tools for learning.

3. Integration of simple conversation into first and second year bib-

lical Hebrew teaching.

4. Emphasis on reading large quantities of Hebrew, even if this

involves using some of the modern lexicon indexes, in contrast to

the much out-dated and pedagogically weak method of forcing

elementary students to spend the bulk of their time hunting for

words in the lexicon.5

What precipitates these suggestions? In the first place it needs to

be understood that Modern Hebrew was revived on the basis of

biblical models, and where these could not be found, Mishnaic and

later Hebrew models. Israeli Hebrew, thus, is much closer to biblical

Hebrew than Modern Greek is to Koine. In fact, the average Israeli

5 Using such helps, for example, as T. A. Armstrong, D. L. Busby, and Cyril F.

Carr, *A Reader's Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zon-

dervan Publishing House, 1980-); John Joseph Owens, *Genesis* (San Francisco:

Harper & Row, 1978); Bruce Einspahr, *Index to the Brown. Driver, & Briggs Hebrew*

*and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1976).

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high school student can read the OT fluently and older children can

read it with better comprehension than some American Hebrew

scholars, to say nothing of college and seminary students. Hebrew is a

living language, which one can study and hear in the classrooms and

on the streets of the land of the Bible, and there is now available a

large mass of material from books to newspapers to tapes and records

and Ulpan courses of every description. Israelis teach in schools all

over the world, but for the serious student of Hebrew, the wise course

is to follow in the footsteps of Jerome, who in the 4th century went to

Bethlehem to learn Hebrew from native speakers. Israel is a country

which is prepared for teaching Hebrew to all comers, and its teachers

are very good indeed.

American college and seminary students as well as teachers have

the opportunity to benefit from this new availability of resources for

learning the language of the OT. And Modern Hebrew provides the

essential, but often neglected, ingredients for any language learning

which will be truly meaningful: hearing, speaking, and composition.

To neglect these in favor of reading only puts the student of biblical

Hebrew at a disadvantage which slows progress immensely. If the

exegete realizes, as do the teachers of any other modern language

such as German or French, that all four aspects of language learning

(hearing, speaking, composition, and reading) must be incorporated

in the instructional process, he will immediately recognize the ad-

vantage of using Modern Hebrew. Protestant evangelical Hebrew lin-

guistic scholarship is far behind Israeli scholarship because it has

refused to recognize this basic fact of language learning: one cannot

approach native intuition (which should be the goal of all language

learning) unless he incorporates all four aspects of language learning.

The result is often a weakened understanding which sometimes results

in artificial exegesis and translation.

Modern Hebrew pronunciation follows the Sephardic (eastern

Mediterranean and Spanish) pronunciation of the few consonants

and vowels which differ from the pronunciation in the Ashkenazi

(European and eastern European) and "Rabbinic" systems. The system

has been adopted almost world-wide by Jews except in some syna-

gogues. The main differences between Modern and the other systems

is in the pronunciation of ד, ו, t, and the vowels ָ and ַ Israelis

pronounce ד as "d" (instead of dh without the dagesh), ו as v (instead

of w), and ת as t (instead of th without the dagesh). Both ָ and ַ are

pronounced like "a" in "father." Other differences between what one

would hear in an American seminary and on the streets of Jeru-

salem mostly involve the difference between words artifically pro-

nounced, and words pronounced in flowing speech and real phonetic

environments.

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There is absolutely no compelling reason to continue the

"American-Protestant" pronunciation of biblical Hebrew, whose

original pronunciation cannot be accurately reconstructed in any

case. Modern Hebrew is the key to a whole new world of OT study,

and opponents only impoverish themselves and their students.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

On the basis, then, of the overwhelming advantages of using

modern living pronunciation systems for the teaching of biblical Greek

and Hebrew, we conclude that the path of the future ought to lie, and

indeed will lie, in that direction. The transition from the outdated

systems to the modern ones will require some patience and under-

standing, especially among teaching colleagues. But it is worth the

effort, for everyone will benefit: the teacher himself, the student, and

the future recipients of the student's exegesis from the pulpit and in

the classroom.

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