

THE CASE FOR MODERN PRONUNCIATION OF BIBLICAL LANGUAGES

GARY G. COHEN AND C. NORMAN SELLERS

In the majority of Christian educational institutions today artificial 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 embarrassment 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.

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."¹ 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 probable 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 precisely the pronunciation system of 1st century Greek speakers. And as a result some have preferred a reconstructed classical [attic] pronunciation, while others have preferred to use a real pronunciation that is capable of being tested by actual first-hand observation, the pronunciation of Modern Greek.

It is Erasmus (1466-1536) who is generally credited with formulating 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 Ibid., 41-42.

the West today. At about the same time Reuchlin (1455-1522) introduced 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 expulsion 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 consonant clusters, there is little difference between the two systems of pronunciation.

⁴ Ibid., 237.

Since one cannot reconstruct precisely the 1st-century pronunciation 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 differently as possible from every other letter. This is its chief pedagogical 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 phonological value, "v." The same is true of α 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 language 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, ϵ is long \bar{a} to some and long \bar{i} to others; \omicron (omicron) is long \bar{o} 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.

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 Modern Greek, there seems to be no compelling reason to retain the Erasmian pronunciation system.

HEBREW PRONUNCIATION

Many of the arguments in favor of Modern Greek pronunciation apply to the employment of Modern Hebrew pronunciation as well. But there are some differences.

Hebrew is a Semitic language, is read from right to left, and has guttural 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 proceed 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 teaching Hebrew are:

1. Adoption of the modern Israeli pronunciation.
2. Utilization of modern audio and video tools for learning.
3. Integration of simple conversation into first and second year biblical 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: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980-); John Joseph Owens, *Genesis* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978); Bruce Einar, *Index to the Brown, Driver, & Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1976).

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 advantage of using Modern Hebrew. Protestant evangelical Hebrew linguistic 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 synagogues. The main differences between Modern and the other systems is in the pronunciation of ד, ו, ת, and the vowels א and ע. 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 א and ע are pronounced like "a" in "father." Other differences between what one would hear in an American seminary and on the streets of Jerusalem mostly involve the difference between words artificially pronounced, and words pronounced in flowing speech and real phonetic environments.

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 understanding, 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.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Grace Theological Seminary
200 Seminary Dr.
Winona Lake, IN 46590
www.grace.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: ted.hildebrandt@gordon.edu
for Biblicalelearning.org.