



## The Greek of the New Testament: Deissmann, Moulton, & Robertson Confirm Koinē Autographs; The Rise of 20th-Century Koinē-Based Biblical Analysis

Dana, H. E. & Julius R. Mantey. *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*. (Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1955), 9-10:

### The Greek of the New Testament

There was a time when the scholars who dealt with the original text of the New Testament regarded its Greek as a special Holy Ghost language, prepared under divine direction for the Scripture writers. When the fallacy of this conception began to grow evident, two opposing schools developed. The Hebraists contended that the Septuagint and the New Testament were written in a Biblical Greek; the Purists contended that they represented variations of the classical Attic. But beginning with Johann Winer in 1825 there came a revolution in the views of New Testament scholarship relative to this matter. As a result of the labors of Adolf Deissmann in Germany, William Moulton in England, and A. T. Robertson in America, all question has been removed from the conclusion that New Testament Greek is simply a sample of the colloquial Greek of the first century; i.e., the Koinē Greek. The inspired writers of the New Testament wrote in the ordinary language of the masses, as might have been expected. (p. 9-10)

Robertson shows that the progress of opinion among New Testament Greek scholars has been for more than half a century toward the conclusion now universally accepted that the Greek of the New Testament is but a specimen of the vernacular Koinē of the first century. But the complete establishment of the new method is an accomplishment of the twentieth century. The future will countenance no other view of the Greek New Testament. (p. 10)

There were several ways that the philologists such as Deissmann, Moulton, Robertson, and others established the validity of their thesis, that is, that the Greek of the New Testament was the common language of the first century. The three most important contributors were as mentioned:

**The Papyri.** This ancient writing material was made from the papyrus reed, an Egyptian water plant. Its use dates back to extreme antiquity, and extends down to the Byzantine period. Papyri are now discovered in Egypt, where climatic conditions have favored their preservation. They are especially valuable to the student of the Greek New Testament, both because of the wide range of their literary quality and their exhibition of the typical Koinē. They represent every kind of general literature, from the casual correspondence of friends to the technicalities of a legal contract. They represent the ordinary language of the people and it was in this type of language that our New Testament was written. P. 11)

**Inscriptions.** These are found in abundance on several sites of important centers of Mediterranean civilization. They are found "either in their original positions or lying under ruins. They are usually notices, carved upon slabs of stone for official, civic, and memorial purposes. Their value has been not only literary but historical. (p. 11-12)

**Ostraca.** The *ostraca* [ ὄστρακον, *ostrakon* ] were potsherds—fragments of broken jugs or other earthen vessels—used by the poorer classes for memoranda, receipts, and the like. "As linguistic memorials of the lower classes these humble potsherd texts shed light on many a detail of the linguistic character of our sacred book—that book which was written, not by learned men but by simple folk, by men who themselves confessed that they had their treasure in earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4:7). And thus the modest ostraca rank as of equal value with the papyri and inscriptions" [Deissmann, *Philology of the Greek Bible*, 35]. (p. 12)



NOTE: Permit me to repeat an excerpt from what I have just quoted: "... the Greek of the New Testament is but a specimen of the vernacular Koinē of the first century. But the complete establishment of the new method is an accomplishment of the twentieth century. The future will countenance no other view of the Greek New Testament." The impact of these last three sentences have tremendous meaning for those who pursue biblical truth in what have come to be known as doctrinal churches. The importance of the discovery that Koinē Greek is the language of the New Testament cannot be overstated. Interpreters up to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century sought to analyze the Greek New Testament in one of two ways, (1) as a special divinely inspired use of the Koinē Greek unique to the Bible or (2) it was Classical or Attic Greek. Work by Deissmann, Moulton, Robertson and others revealed that the language of the Scripture was the common tongue of the Roman Empire of the first century, the Koinē Greek.

Realizing that an accurate interpretation of a given word required a fluent understanding of the language in which it was written, Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer was motivated to found Dallas Theological Seminary. There he assembled a faculty that placed heavy emphasis on the languages, Hebrew and Koinē, along with Systematic Theology.

Accurate theology can only be developed through accurate interpretation of Scripture. Graduates of Dallas were thus among the first of this century to be regularly prepared in Koinē-based biblical analysis. And among the stellar graduates was my mentor, Robert B. Thieme, Jr. In fact, few, if any, biblical scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have exploited the languages as effectively as he has.

Colonel Thieme worked daily with the Hebrew and Koinē Greek for 62 years, nine years in academic preparation and 53 years studying and teaching. Others know the languages and utilize them in their exegesis. But none has come near the amount of time the Colonel logged in the study of the languages or possesses as complete an understanding of the Koinē as he does. Therefore, in 1976 when I had to make a choice as to how I would prepare myself for the ministry, I chose to go to Houston and study theology under the master theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It's not the man it's the message. But the message is dependent upon the interpretation. And the interpretation is developed from an accurate translation. And an accurate translation emerges from knowledge of the language. And if the language under scrutiny is misunderstood, then everything falls apart. The New Testament is not Classical Greek or "Holy Ghost" Greek. It is Koinē Greek, the common, everyday language spoken by the masses in the first century A.D. I'd like to amplify further by quoting two men. First, R. B. Thieme, Jr., and secondly, A. T. Robertson.

**Thieme, R. B. Jr. *Canonicity*. (Houston: R. B. Thieme, Jr., Bible Ministries, 1973), 57:**

Perhaps the two most distinguished philologists of all time were Adolf Deissmann and Herman von Soden. Their tireless studies resulted in important advances toward our complete understanding of the Koinē Greek.

Von Soden's life was cut off ... before his work could be finished properly; but Deissmann lived to publish his findings. It is to men like these we owe a debt of gratitude for furthering our knowledge of the original Scriptures and their communication and interpretation according to the time in which they were written.

A. T. Robinson offers the following very instructive comments in the Preface to his six-volume series:

**Robinson, A. T. "Preface." Vol. 1 of *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1930), vii-x:**

New light has come from the papyri discoveries in Egypt. Unusual Greek words from the standpoint of the literary critic or classical scholar are here found in everyday use in letters and business and public documents. The New Testament Greek is now known to be not a new or peculiar dialect of the Greek language, but the very lingo of the time. The vernacular *Koinē*, the spoken language of the day, appears in the New Testament.



I have called these volumes *Word Pictures* for the obvious reason that language was originally purely pictographic. Children love to read by pictures either where it is all picture or where pictures are interspersed with simple words. The Rosetta Stone is a famous illustration. The Egyptian hieroglyphics come at the top of the stone, followed by the Demotic Egyptian language with the Greek translation at the bottom. By means of this stone the secret of the hieroglyphs or pictographs was unravelled. The pictures were first for ideas, then for words, then for syllables, then for letters.

Words have never gotten wholly away from the picture stage. These old Greek words in the New Testament are rich with meaning. They speak to us out of the past and with lively images to those who have eyes to see. It is impossible to translate all of one language into another. Much can be carried over, but not all. Delicate shades of meaning defy the translator.

And so a dilemma faces the pastor-teacher since the close of the Koiné Period of the Greek language. Since A.D. 330, communicators of doctrine have had the task of translating the Scripture from its original Koiné Greek into the native language of his congregation. As Dr. Robertson writes, "It is impossible to translate all of one language into another. Much can be carried over, but not all. Delicate shades of meaning defy the translator." But what if over the centuries there developed a language that was so flexible and malleable that it was able to readily absorb thousands of words from many languages so that these delicate shades could be communicated? What if that language became so popular that it developed into the equivalent of a modern-day Koiné, a common vernacular? Would not such a language be a powerful tool in the communication of the gospel and biblical truth to many nations and peoples?

I submit to you that such a language has developed and it is our very own English. Its development had modest beginnings and a suspect pedigree but it emerged as the world's *lingua franca* for the 20th and 21st centuries.