

Jesus Pronounced Greek Differently than Your Seminary Professor, a New Book Argues

By Dr. David Roach, BibleMesh Institute

First-century Greek speakers didn't pronounce words like most modern seminarians are taught to pronounce them. While today's budding Greek scholars are taught to pronounce the letter η (eta) like the final vowel sound in "obey," it actually was pronounced like the vowel sound in "feet." Contemporary students are taught to pronounce the letter ω (omega) like the long o in "tone," but in the first century it was voiced like the short o in "for."

These and other pronunciation differences are explained in a new book by Philemon Zachariou, *Reading and Pronouncing Biblical Greek: Historical Pronunciation versus Erasmian* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, June 2020). The system employed in most contemporary college and seminary classes (known as the Erasmian pronunciation) dates from the sixteenth century and sounds vastly different from the language of Jesus and Paul, argues Zachariou, a native Greek and retired Greek professor. Mispronouncing the New Testament language not only is a matter of linguistic inaccuracy, he writes, it has implications for biblical interpretation as well. "What is at stake," Zachariou claims, is "the meaning of the Greek texts, which needs to receive light exegetically not just from earlier but also from the later history of the language." Zachariou advocates a system known as "historical Greek pronunciation" (HGP).

The Renaissance scholar Desiderius Erasmus originated the Erasmian pronunciation in a 1528 book. Ironically, Erasmus himself did not utilize the pronunciation named after him, nor did he advocate its use. But within several decades, it became dominant—due in part to the antagonism of early Protestants toward Eastern Orthodox scholars who employed HGP, Zachariou argues, and in part to the Greeks' then-struggle with Turkish oppressors, which hindered them from speaking into the debate.

Koine Greek, the language of the New Testament, took shape in the fourth century BC, according to Zachariou, when Alexander the Great united all the peoples of Greece and their dialects amalgamated into one common tongue. That koine dialect spread throughout the known world, continuing in the medieval Byzantine Empire and adapting into modern Greek (known as Neohellenic) with few material changes. Greek grammarian A.T. Robertson wrote in the early twentieth century that "few even among professional scholars are aware how small the difference is between the Greek of the N.T. and a contemporary Athenian newspaper."¹

But can Erasmian pronunciation actually inhibit New Testament study? Zachariou says yes. Utilizing HGP helps students understand that nuances of some biblical words are reflected in their modern use more than their classical use—which can reflect the state of Greek dialects before they coalesced into koine. Zachariou notes as examples the terms in John 15 often translated as "vine" (ἄμπελος [ambelos]) and "branches" (κλήματα [klimata]). In light of Neohellenic, he argues, they are better translated as "vines" (κλήματα) and "vineyard" (ἄμπελος). This revised translation is more accurate linguistically, he claims, and it more effectively conveys the theological notion of the passage: by remaining planted in Jesus like vines in the ground, His disciples receive necessary spiritual nutrients and live to produce fruit.

Union University scholar in Tennessee Mark Dubis says, "In the 1500s, the chancellor of the University of Cambridge decreed that students who used the Erasmian pronunciation be expelled. How, then, have we gone from such eschewing of Erasmian to the nearly wholesale adoption of it in today's English-speaking colleges and seminaries? Zachariou expertly illumines this history and charts the path toward the recovery of the historical pronunciation of ancient Greek in the modern academy."

¹ A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 24.