

## 1 John 1:1-4, The Greek of the New Testament: The Rediscovery of Koine & Resultant Exegetical Advances in the 20th Century

### 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 Koine Greek. The inspired writers of the New Testament wrote in the ordinary language of the masses, as might have been expected.

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 Koine 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.

There were several ways that the philologists such as Deissman, 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 two 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 Koine. 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.

*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.

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 Koine 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 Koine 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 Koine 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 Koine 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 Koine Greek, 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 Koine-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 has now been working daily with the Hebrew and Koine Greek for 60 years, nine years in academic preparation and 51 years studying and teaching. Others know the languages and utilize them in their exegesis. But none come near the amount of time he has logged in the study of the language or possess as complete an understanding of the Koine 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 Koine 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; p. 57:**

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

Van Soden's life was cut off in 1918, at the Hindenburg Line, 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; pp. 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 *Koine*, 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 the dilemma which faces the pastor-teacher since the close of the Koine Period of the Greek language. Since A.D. 330, communicators of doctrine have had the task of translating the Scripture from its original Koine 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 Koine, 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 has emerged to be the *lingua franca* of the 20<sup>th</sup> and soon to arrive 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

In order to document this claim, I offer you some comments by:

**Bryson, Bill. *The Mother Tongue: English & How It Got That Way*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1990; pp. 46-59 passim:**

In the country inns of a small corner of northern Germany, in the spur of land connecting Schleswig-Holstein to Denmark, you can sometimes hear people talking in what sound eerily like a lost dialect of English. The language is very close to the way people spoke in Britain more than 1,000 years ago. This area of Germany, called Angeln /ANG-eln/, was once the seat of the Angles, one of the Germanic tribes that 1,500 years ago crossed the North Sea to Britain, where they displaced the native Celts and gave the world what would one day become its most prominent language.

Not far away, in the marshy headlands of northern Holland and western Germany lives a group of people whose dialect is even more closely related to English. These are the Frisians, whose Germanic tongue has been so little altered by time that many of them can still read the medieval epic *Beowulf* almost at sight.

In about A.D. 450, following the withdrawal of Roman troops from Britain, these two groups of people and two other related groups, the Saxons and Jutes, began a long exodus to Britain.

The early Anglo-Saxons left no account of these events for the simple reason that they were functionally illiterate. And yet for all their shortcomings, the Anglo-Saxons possessed a language that was rich in possibilities and once literacy was brought to them, it flourished with astonishing speed. The main bringer of literacy, and of Christianity, was St. Augustine, who traveled to Britain with forty missionaries in 597 and within a year had converted King Ethelbert of Kent at his small provincial capital, Canterbury. With that initial victory, Christianity spread over the island, towing literacy in its wake. In only a little over a hundred years England became a center of culture and learning as great as any in Europe.

No one, of course, can say at what point English became a separate language, distinct from Germanic dialects of mainland Europe. What is certain is that the language the invaders brought with them soon began to change.

There was a great deal of subtlety and flexibility built into the language and once they learned to write, their literary outpouring was both immediate and astonishingly assured.

One final cataclysm awaited the English language: the Norman conquest of 1066. The Normans were Vikings who had settled in northern France 200 years before. They had given their name to a French province, Normandy. But they had abandoned their language and much of their culture and become French in manner and speech. The variety of French the Normans spoke was not the speech of Paris, but a rural dialect, and its divergence from standard French became even more pronounced when it took root in England. This had important consequences for the English language of today and may even have contributed to its survival.

Norman French, like the Germanic tongues before it, made a lasting impact on English vocabulary. Of the 10,000 words we adopted from Norman French, some three-quarters are still in use—among them *justice, jury, felony, traitor, prison, and parliament*.

Because English had no official status, for three centuries it drifted. Without a cultural pivot, some place to set a standard, differences in regional usage became more pronounced rather than less.

And yet it survived. If there is one uncanny thing about the English language, it is its incredible persistence. In retrospect it seems unthinkable to us now that it might have been otherwise, but we forget just how easily people forsake their tongues. And yet in Britain, despite the constant buffetings of history, English survived. It is a cherishable irony that a language that succeeded almost by stealth, treated for centuries as the inadequate and second-rate tongue of peasants, should one day become the most important and successful language in the world.

Its lowly position almost certainly helped English to become a similar, less inflected language. By making English the language mainly of uneducated people, the Norman conquest made it easier for grammatical changes to go forward unchecked.

Isolated from the rest of Europe by the English Channel, the Norman rulers gradually came to think of themselves not as displaced Frenchmen but as Englishmen. Intermarrying between Normans and British contributed to the sense of Englishness. The children of these unions learned French from their fathers, but English from their mothers. For a time, at least up until the age of Chaucer, the two [languages] coexisted.

The harsh, clacking, guttural Anglo-French had become a source of amusement to the people of Paris, and this provided perhaps the ultimate blow to the language in England. Norman aristocrats, rather than be mocked for persevering with an inferior dialect that many of them ill spoke anyway, began to take increasing pride in English. So total was this reversal of attitude that when Henry V was looking for troops to fight with him at Agincourt in 1415, he used the French threat to the English language as a rallying cry.

It is sometimes suggested that our vocabulary is vast because it was made to be, simply because of the various linguistic influences that swept over it. But in fact this love of variety of expression runs deeper than that. It was already evident in the early poetry of the Anglo-Saxons that they had an intuitive appreciation of words sufficient to ensure that even if England had never been invaded again her language would have been rich with synonyms.

It is true that English was immeasurably enriched by the successive linguistic waves that washed over the British Isles. But it is probably closer to the truth to say that the language we speak today is rich and expressive not so much because new words were imposed on it as because they were welcomed.

In summary, we have learned because of the topography of Greece that the ancient Greek language acquired quite a number of dialects. Out from these dialects it was the Attic or Classical Greek that emerged as dominant. It was the language of fifth-century B.C. Athens and the Age of Pericles. Due to various influences during the time of the Roman Republic a common language developed known as Koine. This dialect, spoken by all Roman citizens, was the language chosen by the Holy Spirit for the New Testament canon. It was in this language that the people of the first century were evangelized and learned doctrine.

Unfortunately, it was the late 19<sup>th</sup> century before it was discovered that the New Testament was not written in some special “Holy Ghost” Greek or the classical Attic Greek but rather the Koine.

It was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that this knowledge began to have a marked influence on biblical analysis, exegesis, and scholarship. One of the theologians who picked up on this and began to develop a systematic theology based on Koine exegesis was Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer. His protégé, Robert B. Thieme, Jr., exploited this discovery by becoming an expert in the Koine and then endeavoring to bring into the English language an advanced theology based on a word-by-word analysis of the New Testament Scripture. He has continued this effort for over 60 years and we are the beneficiaries of that research.

Finally, we are blessed with a language that has become the *lingua franca* of the modern world. We are fluent in English, which according to Bill Bryson's *The Mother Tongue*, "is used as an official language in countries with a population of about 1.6 billion, roughly a third of the world total." [p. 181]

It thus remains my duty to continue to teach the Scripture from the original languages and to bring its message into the Koine equivalent of our day, namely, English. It remains the duty of each of you to meditate upon the finished product so that you might facilitate the standards, principles, and mandates of the eternal Logos into your stream of consciousness and into the neural network of your brain's cerebral cortex.

**Joshua 1:8 a** - "This book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth but you shall facilitate its content day and night ..."

**Psalms 119:41** - [CTL] May your lovingkindness also come to me, O Lord; Your deliverance according to your promise [ *imrah* ],

**v 42** - so that I shall have an answer for him who reproaches me, for I have confidence in Your Word [ *dabar* ].