

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

What Is Biblical Greek?

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Exploring the Language of the New Testament and Classical Literature

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Section of Bodmer Papyrus 66, a near complete codex of the Gospel of John and one of the oldest well-preserved New Testament manuscripts dating to c. 200 CE. *Public domain.*

Biblical Greek, as it is commonly known, is a dialect of the ancient Greek language known as *hēkoinē dialektos* (“the common dialect”) or Koine Greek. This dialect became the *lingua franca* of the eastern Mediterranean world for almost a millennium.

Unlike other biblical languages, such as [Hebrew](#) and [Aramaic](#), Greek belongs to the Indo-European family of languages. This group includes most European languages, as well as Persian, Sanskrit, Basque, and the language of the [ancient Hittites](#). A highly inflected language, Greek encodes the grammatical function and meaning of sentences through variation in word forms rather than by word order. Greek verbs change their endings and even stems to express tense, mood, voice, person, and number; adjectives, articles, pronouns, and nouns can be modified to reflect gender, number, and case.

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Clay tablet recording oil quantities in Linear B found at Knossos by Arthur Evans. *Vintagedept*, CC Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

The earliest written form of Greek was a syllabic script called Linear B or Mycenaean Greek, the writing system of the Mycenaean civilization, attested on Crete, the Cycladic islands, and mainland Greece. Derived from the symbols of the still-undeciphered Minoan Linear A, Linear B originated in the late Minoan and Mycenaean periods (1450–1200 BCE) as a scribal language used by the royal administration. The language used 87 symbols that represented consonant-vowel combinations (e.g., *da, do, de, du*). Like many others following the [Bronze Age collapse](#), the Mycenaean civilization crumbled around 1200 BCE, and many people groups with Aegean origins (i.e., “Sea Peoples,” such as [the Philistines](#)) began to spread throughout the Mediterranean world. This collapse precipitated the so-called “Dark Age” of Greek history (c. 1100–950 BCE) in which Linear B was seemingly forgotten.

A new form of the Greek language appeared centuries later using an alphabetic writing system borrowed from the Phoenicians—a system that was also used by the Israelites to write [Paleo-Hebrew](#). The earliest evidence for this alphabetic Greek writing was found on a piece of pottery dating to c. 724 BCE known as the Dipylon Jug. It is also at this time that the famous poet Homer is thought to have lived, perhaps first penning his great epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* using this new writing system.

Like most languages, ancient Greek had various regional dialects; however, with the cultural dominance of Athens following their victories over the Persians in the early fifth century BCE, the Attic dialect became the most prestigious. The era of history and literature known as the Classical period (fifth–fourth centuries BCE) saw many famous writers and thinkers emerge from Athens. These included such illustrious poets as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, as well as historians Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, and the great philosophers Plato and Aristotle.

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After Philip II of Macedon (382–336 BCE) defeated the Athenians and Thebans, the king adopted Greek culture and made Attic Greek the official court language of his new Greco-Macedonian empire. After Philip's son and successor, Alexander the Great, marched his armies eastward and conquered the large Persian Empire, Greek culture spread throughout these lands with the formation of military garrisons and new colonies of settlers from Macedonia and the Greek mainland. The Koine dialect, which was widely used in the military and by the new settlers, quickly spread throughout the kingdoms of Alexander's successors until it became the language of government, diplomacy, commerce, and education, supplanting [Aramaic](#), which was the lingua franca of the former Persian Empire. Even so, Aramaic continued to be used and spoken throughout these lands. The Judea of Jesus's day was a multilingual society where much of the population spoke both Greek and Aramaic on a regular basis. It was within this cultural milieu that the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible came to be written. Traditionally thought to have been composed in Alexandria, Egypt, during the reign of Ptolemy II (285–247 BCE), this corpus of Jewish scriptures, translated into Koine Greek, was believed to be the work of 70 scribes, giving rise to its common name, the Septuagint ("the seventy").



Ceramic vessel on which the Dipylon inscription was written. It reads "Whoever of all these dancers now plays most delicately, of him this..."
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Significant changes occurred with the development of Koine from Attic Greek. These included the vanishing of the dual number (used to specify two of something), the loss of vowel lengths, and the simplification of diphthongs, such as *ai*, *ei*, and *oi*, into monophthongs (*e*, *i*, and *u*, respectively). These changes naturally occurred as the language spread to different lands and became more standardized. The language changes are not unlike the differences between the written English of century or so ago, which generally followed more formal grammatical rules, and the English of today, which is employed by many people all over the world, not just by native English-speakers.

Like the Septuagint, the New Testament was also written in Koine Greek, as were the writings of the early Church Fathers. The majority of the New Testament was written in a non-literary form of Koine—the everyday language of the people. It is simple and to the point in its style and makes frequent use of the historical present tense. It also shows a preference for direct rather than indirect speech.

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Not all contemporary authors wrote in the Koine of the Bible, however. Many, like the historian Polybius (c. 200–118 BCE), wrote in a more literary and poetic form of Koine, while others, such as Lucian (c. 125–180 CE), composed works in the Attic Greek of the Classical period. Koine essentially remained the same through the Byzantine period (c. 330–1453 CE), with many authors progressively choosing to write in the literary Koine style. Classical Attic was still kept alive as well by the occasional writer, such as the historian Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500–565 CE).

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Unlike many languages of the ancient world, Greek continued to be used in both written and oral forms through the centuries. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the close of the Byzantine period, the Greek language continued to be employed by the Greek Orthodox Church and various Greek-speaking peoples until the present day. Despite the naturally occurring modifications that take place within any living language, Modern Greek is remarkably similar to its ancient predecessor, Koine.

Many resources are available for learning biblical Greek. Used in seminaries for decades, Machen's [*New Testament Greek for Beginners*](#) and Stephan Paine's [*Beginning Greek: A Functional Approach*](#) are both available online at sites like [archive.org](#). Also readily available is [*A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*](#). For those ready to dive into Greek texts, many are available at the Perseus Digital Library, and the Society of Biblical Literature has made their critically edited [*Greek New Testament*](#) available for free.

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