

This document is adapted from the opening chapters of a forthcoming textbook by Dr. Bradley McLean.

MODERN GREEK PRONUNCIATION

1. The Greek Alphabet and Pronunciation

Whereas the English alphabet consists of twenty-six letters, the Greek alphabet has only twenty-four characters. Many of these letters are similar to the English (i.e., Latin) characters that you already know. Since modern editions of the Greek New Testament employ mostly lower-case letters, it is suggested that you begin by learning the lower case letters first.

| | | <i>letter name</i> | <i>pronunciation</i> | <i>phonic symbol</i> | <i>examples – listen to audio</i> |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| A | α | alfa | ha | [a] | Ἐν ἀρχῇ |
| B | β | veeta | vat | [v] | κατέλαβεν |
| Γ | γ | ghama | go, or yellow | [g] or [y] | ὁ λόγος ὃ γέγονεν |
| Δ | δ | dhelta | the | [ð] | δι' αὐτοῦ |
| E | ε | epseelon | bet | [e] | Ἐν ἀρχῇ |
| Z | ζ | zeeta | zoo | [z] | ἡ ζωῆ |
| H | η | eeta | feet | [iy] | ἦν |
| Θ | θ | theeta | think | [θ] | πρὸς τὸν θεόν |
| I | ι | yota | feet | [iy] | δι' αὐτοῦ |
| K | κ | kappa | keep | [k] | καὶ |
| Λ | λ | lamdha | letter | [l] | ὁ λόγος |
| M | μ | mee | moon | [m] | ἀπεσταλμένος |
| N | ν | nee | noon | [n] | Ἐν ἀρχῇ |
| Ξ | ξ | ksee | ox | [ks] | ἔξουσίαν |
| O | ο | omeekron | dog | [o] | ὁ λόγος |
| Π | π | pee | put | [p] | πρὸς τὸν θεόν |
| P | ρ | rho | r (trilled) ¹ | [r / rh] ² | Ἐν ἀρχῇ ῥαββί |
| Σ | σ / ς ³ | seegma | sing (or zero) | [s] or [z] ⁴ | ἀπεσταλμένος κόσμου |
| T | τ | taf | top | [t] | πρὸς τὸν θεόν |
| Υ | υ | eepeelon | feet | [iy] | μαρτυρίαν |
| Φ | φ | fee | find | [f] | τὸ φῶς |
| X | χ | khee | loch ⁵ | [kh] | Ἐν ἀρχῇ |
| Ψ | ψ | psee | hips | [ps] | ὑψωσεν, ὑψωθῆναι |
| Ω | ω | omegha | dog | [o] | ἡ ζωῆ, τὸ φῶς |

¹ Like trilled French 'r.'

² 'Rh' when the first letter of a word.

³ Initial or internal *sigma* is written as σ. This *sigma* is known as 'medial sigma.' But as the last letter of a word, *sigma* is formed as ς. This *sigma* is known as 'final' sigma.

⁴ In most cases, *sigma* is pronounced like English 's' as in 'sing.' However, before a voiced consonant (i.e., β, γ, δ, μ, ν, ρ), σ is pronounced like ζ. For example, κόσμος (**koz**-mos), Ἰσραήλ (iyz-ra-**iy**l). The same transformation takes place even when σ is the last letter of a word (-ς) and the next word starts with a voiced consonant: e.g., ὁ κόσμος μου (o-**koz**-moz-mu), τοὺς δύο (**tuz**- **diy**-o).

⁵ Rough guttural or aspirated sound; 'ch' as in Scottish 'loch,' or German 'Buch.'

2. Pronouncing Vowels

| | | |
|---|------|------------------------------|
| α | [a] | ἀπό (a- po) |
| ε | [e] | ἐλπίς (el- piys) |
| ι | [iy] | ἴσος (iy -sos) |
| ο | [o] | ὄνομα (o -no-ma) |
| η | [iy] | μή (miy) |
| υ | [iy] | κύριος (kiy -riy-os) |
| ω | [o] | φῶς (fos) |

Notice that η, υ and ι are all pronounced the same way: [iy] as in ‘feet.’

3. Pronouncing Diphthongs

Certain two-vowel combinations produce a *single* distinct sound. These two-letter combinations are known as ‘diphthongs.’ They are pronounced as follows:

| <i>diphthong</i> | <i>pronunciation guide</i> | <i>phonic symbol</i> | |
|------------------|---|----------------------|---|
| αι | bet | [e] | καί = ke |
| ει | feet | [iy] | ἀξάνειν = af- xa -niyn |
| οι | feet | [iy] | ἄνθρωποι = AN-thro-piy |
| υι | feet | [iy] | υῖός = hiy-OSS |
| ου | pool | [u] | οὔτος = oo -toss |
| αυ | like <i>af</i> before π, κ, τ (unvoiced stops), φ, χ, θ (voiced fricatives), σ, ξ, ψ (sibilants) ⁶ but like <i>av</i> elsewhere (as in <i>avenue</i>) | [af] | αὐτοῦ = af- too ἀξάνειν = af- xa -niyn |
| ευ | like <i>ef</i> before π, κ, τ (unvoiced stops), φ, χ, θ (voiced fricatives), σ, ξ, ψ (sibilants) but like <i>ev</i> elsewhere. | [ef] | ἐπαύριον = e- pav -riy-on θαυμάσης = thav- ma -siys |
| ηυ | like <i>iyf</i> before π, κ, τ (unvoiced stops), φ, χ, θ (voiced fricatives), σ, ξ, ψ (sibilants) but like <i>iyv</i> elsewhere. | [iyf] | πιστεύωσιν = piys- tef -so-sin εὐθύνετε = ef- thiy -na-te |
| | | [ev] | πιστεύουσιν = piys- ev -oo-sin εὐρίσκει = ev- riys -kiy |
| | | [iyv] | ἠΰξησεν = iyf -xiy-sen προσηύχeto. = pros- iyf -khe-to ἠύλῃσαμεν = iyv- liy -sa-men ἠΰρισκον = iyv-riys-kon |

Notes:

ει, οι, and υι are pronounced the same as η, υ, and ι, namely as [iy] (‘feet’). But αι is pronounced like ε (bet).

When two vowels occur together but not in one of the above combinations, pronounce each vowel separately.

Examples: θεός μαρτυρίαν ἐξουσίαν ἐπαύριον Λευίτας Ἀβραάμ
the-**os** mar-tiy-**riy**-an ex-oo-**siy**-an e-**pav**-riy-on lev-**iy**-tas a-bra-**am**

⁶ You will notice that these consonants all have one thing in common: they are aspirated. If you hold up your hand to your mouth when you say these sounds, you will feel a puff of air.

4. Pronouncing ‘Stops’ and ‘Fricatives’

Labials: π, β, φ

| | | |
|---|--|-----------------------------|
| π | like <i>p</i> in page: e.g., πόλις (po -liys) | πρὸς τὸν θεόν, ἀπεσταλμένος |
| β | like <i>v</i> in van: e.g., βιβλίον (viv- li -on) | κατέλαβεν, ῥαββί |
| φ | like <i>f</i> in fact: e.g., φίλος (fiy -los) | τὸ φῶς, ἔφη, φωινή |

Dentals: τ, δ, θ

| | | |
|---|--|-------------------------|
| τ | like <i>t</i> in top: e.g., τόπος (to -pos) | πρὸς τὸν θεόν, οὗτος |
| δ | like <i>th</i> in the [ð]: e.g., δοῦλος (du -los) | δι’ αὐτοῦ, ἔδωκεν |
| θ | like <i>th</i> think [θ]: e.g., θάνατος (qa -na-tos) | πρὸς τὸν θεόν, ἀνθρώπων |

Velars: κ, γ, χ

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| κ | like <i>k</i> in keen: e.g., κύριος (kiy -riy-os) | καὶ, σκοτία |
| γ | before and all [e] and [i] sounds (namely, ε, η, ι, υ, αι, ει, οι, υι) like <i>y</i> in yet: e.g., γυνή (iy -niy), γενεά (ye-ne- a), γῆ (iy), γινώσκω (iy- no -sko) | ἐγένετο, ὃ γέγονεν λέγει, γενέσθαι |
| γ | before α, ο, ου, ω, consonants, like ‘hard’ <i>g</i> as in get: e.g., γάμος (ga -mos) | ὁ λόγος, ὃ γέγονεν ἔγνω, ἐγὼ, λέγων |
| χ | like <i>ch</i> in Scottish <i>loch</i> : e.g., χαρά (kha- ra) | Ἐν ἀρχῇ, χωρὶς, ἐρχόμενον |

5. Pronouncing Special Groups of Consonant Clusters

When γ is followed by another γ, χ, or ξ, the nasal sound [ng] is produced (like the final consonants in the English *sing*):

| | | | | |
|---------|--------|---------|---------|------------------------|
| γγ / γκ | finger | [ng-g] | ἄγγελος | (ang -ge-los) |
| | | [ng-g] | ἀγκάλη | (ang- ga -liy) |
| γχ | | [ng-kh] | ἐλέγχω | (e -leng-kho) |
| γξ | banks | [ng-ks] | ἔλεγξις | (e -leng-ksis) |

Similarly when π follows μ, and τ follows ν, in the middle of a word, they become ‘mb’ and ‘nd’ sounds respectively (i.e., a real English ‘b’ and ‘d’ sound results):⁷

| | | | |
|----|-------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| μπ | [mb] ⁸ | ἐμπλοκή | (em-blo- kiy) |
| ντ | [nd] ⁹ | ἀντί | (an- diy) |

⁷ Similarly, when a word ends in -ν, and the following word starts with π, the -ν is pronounced [m] and the π is pronounced [b]: τὸν πόνον (**tom**-bo-non).

⁸ But μπ at the beginning of a word is simply pronounced [b].

⁹ Similarly, if a word ends in -ν, and the following word starts with τ, the τ is pronounced [d]: e.g., τὸν τόνον (**ton**-do-non). If a word ends in -ν, the following word starts with κ, the κ is pronounced [g]: e.g., τὴν κόρην (**tiyn**-go-riyn). So watch for combinations of the accusative articles, τόν and τήν, followed by words beginning with π, τ, and κ.

6. The 'Iota Subscript'

A small *ι* is sometimes written under the vowels *α*, *η*, or *ω*, especially when they are final. This 'iota-subscript' does not affect pronunciation: vowels with an *iota*-subscript are pronounced the same as the corresponding vowel without an 'iota-subscript.' Later, they will help you distinguish different grammatic forms of nouns, adjectives and verbs.

| | | | | |
|---|-----------------|---|------|------------|
| α | pronounced like | α | [a] | σκοτία |
| η | pronounced like | η | [iy] | Ἐν ἀρχῆ |
| ω | pronounced like | ω | [o] | ἐν Αἰγύπτω |

7. Breathing Marks

Every Greek word beginning with a vowel carries a so-called 'breathing' mark above the vowel.¹⁰ These marks have the appearance of an English single quotation mark. Diphthongs receive their breathing mark on the second vowel. There are two types of breathing marks:

| | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| ´ | 'rough' breathing mark (e.g., ἄ) | ὁ λόγος, ἡ ζωὴ, οὗτος |
| ˘ | 'smooth' breathing mark (e.g., ἄ) | Ἐν ἀρχῆ, αὐτῷ |

Modern Greek pronunciation does not add any sound with either of these marks. Nonetheless, you should be able to recognize these editorial marks because they can be important for philological reasons.

8. Greek Accents

Three different accents appear in the Greek New Testament: ´ acute *á* -- ` grave *à* -- ^ circumflex *â*

The only effect of any accent is to indicate the *stressed* syllable; they all have the same effect on pronunciation.

Notes: Diphthongs always receive their accent on the second letter: for example, *καί* not *κάι*.

Words beginning with a vowel or diphthong may have *both* an accent and a breathing mark on the first syllable.

Examples: οὗτος ἦν ἦλθεν ἄνθρωπος

9. The Diaeresis

The diaeresis mark (¨) looks like a German *umlaut*. It often appears in words of foreign derivation (e.g., Hebrew and Latin loan words). It is actually an editorial mark used to indicate that the two vowels, which could be construed as a diphthong, are actually two separate vowels. The diaeresis always appears over the *second* of the two vowels.

Examples: Βηθσαϊδα (Biϑ-sa-iy-**ð**a) = Bethsaida; Μωϋσῆς (Mo-**iy**-siys) = Moses

10. Pronunciation Practice

Listen to and practice reading aloud this short passage from the Gospel of John. Also practice writing it out by hand.

John 1:1-8

Ἐν ἀρχῆ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. ² οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῆ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. ³ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. ὃ γέγονεν ⁴ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων. ⁵ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν. ⁶ Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης. ⁷ οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. ⁸ οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός

¹⁰ The letter *rho* (ρ) also always has a rough breathing mark.