

Studying Greek at The Lukeion Project



It happens at every homeschool convention; someone comes up to me, flashes a quirky grin and quips, “it’s all Greek to me!” I don’t mind a bit. If people have investigated the study of ancient Greek enough to know that I teach it, I’m more than thrilled. With nearly 3,500 years of evidence, Greek may be the spoken language with the longest continuous, documented history. Greek

influenced the development of Latin, and a large percentage of English comes directly or indirectly from these two ancient languages. The student who spends time studying Ancient Greek will be richly rewarded, not only by the ability to read ancient authors in their original language, but also by an improved appreciation and understanding of his or her own language. People have good reason to ask “*What type of Greek do you teach?*” when they come up to me at a homeschool convention. Let me start by briefly telling you my own story.

I began my ancient language studies with Biblical Greek, taking all the classes that my small Bible College offered. When I moved to seminary for my first graduate degree, I jumped into Greek with gusto, and soon became a graduate teaching assistant for Dr. Lewis Foster, a member of the NIV translation team. My first introduction to the world of Greek literature beyond the New Testament was Dr. Foster’s “Hellenistic Greek” class. It was quite an eye-opener for me and I’m very grateful for it. Nevertheless, I viewed the challenges of that class as an anomaly and my confidence in my Greek abilities grew as I concentrated on reading familiar passages from the New Testament. Then I transferred to the Classics program at the University of Cincinnati for doctoral work. I quickly learned that my New Testament Greek studies had ill-prepared me for reading ... well, just about any other Greek literature. Classical Greek students needed only half the time preparing for class that I needed. As I struggled to catch up with my fellow Greek students and master the more challenging elements of Classical Greek, I gained a fresh appreciation for the New Testament within the larger framework of Greek literature.

First-hand experience taught me that “*what kind of Greek*” you study really does matter. Yet the people who ask the question don’t often understand the terms that are involved, so they need some help understanding my answer. There are 4 phrases typically used when discussing the study of ancient Greek:



Lukeion Project students pay a visit to the temple of Hephaestus in Athens, Greece

Classical Greek usually refers to the Greek written from about 500 BC to the time of Alexander the Great. **Attic Greek** (the dialect of Athens) is the dialect that is usually taught, though many textbooks will eventually address the minor differences you encounter in other dialects. Attic Greek is the language of the historian Thucydides, the enduring dramas of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, and the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. It also gives students all the tools they need to read New Testament Greek.

Hellenistic Greek (300 BC – AD 600) is the result of the military campaigns of Alexander the Great. As Greek spread across the eastern Mediterranean, it broke the bounds of the old regional dialects and experienced an infusion of enormous numbers of “Greek-as-a-second-language” speakers. Some simplification occurred and the dialects were smoothed out and standardized, though Attic Greek had the biggest influence on the later version.

Now comes the tricky part: Many people believe the terms **Koine Greek** and **Biblical Greek** are interchangeable, but they aren’t. Both are subsets of the Greek language that arise *during* the period of Hellenistic Greek.

Koine Greek is the most nebulous term, and the most abused. “*Koine*” means simply “common.” It’s a hard term to pin down, but in the most general of terms, it refers to the most widely understood form of spoken and written Hellenistic Greek, the *lingua franca* of the eastern Mediterranean. Yet there isn’t even agreement on how best to describe it. The very existence of this term begs the question, “*What is there besides ‘common’ Greek?*” To use modern parallels, *koine* is the “newspaper” Greek of its day, while academics were writing something a bit more high-brow. Government and commerce each had their own styles, and the best novelists might write in a more sophisticated literary style. There was even something called *Atticizing* Greek, which mimicked the earlier Classical style.

Biblical Greek is the most specific of the terms being considered, and refers to the language and stylistic characteristics of the New Testament. Understood properly, “Biblical Greek” is a subset of both “Hellenistic” and “*koine*” Greek, in much the same way that the language of Shakespearean sonnets is a subset of the English language. When people approach me and ask “do you teach *koine* Greek?” what they usually mean is “do you teach Biblical Greek?”

The study of “Biblical Greek” concentrates on the vocabulary and grammatical constructions found in the New Testament while largely ignoring the rest of Greek literature. Because the New Testament uses a limited vocabulary and includes works by a limited number of authors in a limited number of literary styles, the study of “Biblical” Greek does not prepare a student to read other great works of Classical Greek literature (like Herodotus, Euripides or Plato), and it doesn’t necessarily prepare the student for the Greek that he or she would encounter when reading other Hellenistic or *koine* Greek works (like the Septuagint or Plutarch). Unfortunately, some Biblical Greek grammars and lexicons define words exclusively by their use in the New Testament, as if the New Testament authors wrote a newly invented language rather than the living and spoken language that came complete with baggage and history.



Amy & Regan Barr, founders of The Lukeion Project

I teach Classical (Attic) Greek because I believe it provides the most balanced approach to Ancient Greek. All students will achieve their goals, whether those are to read Herodotus and Aristotle, or the New Testament. While we recognize that the New Testament contains some of the most influential literature to be written in ancient Greek, we also believe that a student’s appreciation for them and for the uniqueness of their message will be heightened and informed by reading them within the context of the greater body of Greek literature. Consequently we’ve chosen a textbook that prepares students to read the full range of Greek literature.