

**The origins and the history of *Koiné*  
*Greek* and its importance when  
studying the Bible**

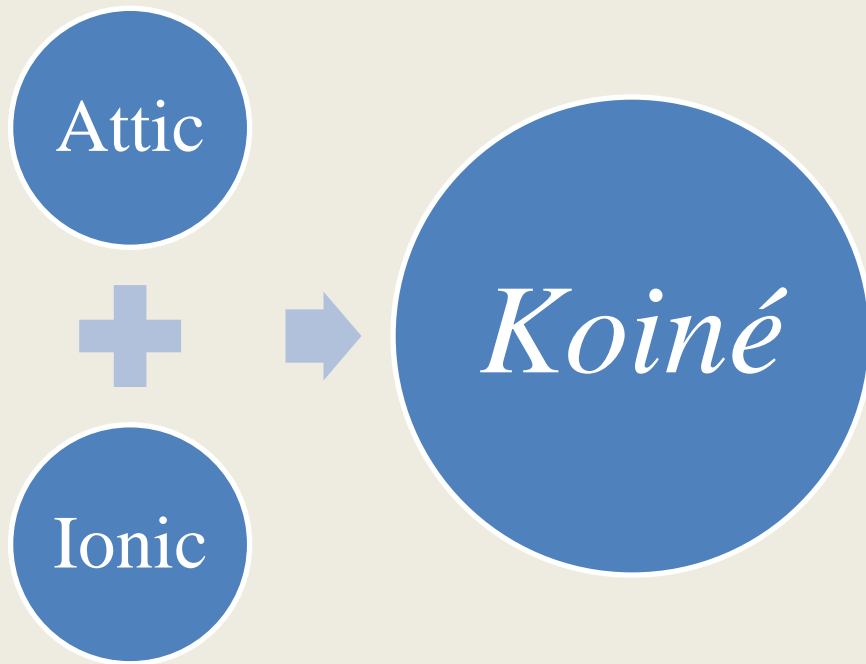
Module: Introduction to New Testament  
Greek

Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> June 2013

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# Origins and History

*Koiné* (Gk. κοινή “common”), was the common regional form of Greek spoken and written during Hellenistic and Roman antiquity. It developed through the spread of Greek following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.



Based mainly on **Attic** and related to **Ionic** speech forms *Koiné* Greek displayed a wide spectrum of different styles.

As the dominant language of the Byzantine Empire it developed further into Medieval Greek the main ancestor of Modern Greek.

*Koiné* is also the language of the Christian **New Testament**, of the **Septuagint** (the 3rd-century BC Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), and of most early Christian theological **writing by the Church Fathers**.

# Origins and History

The Elements of *Koiné* Greek took shape during the Classical Era. The passage into the next period dates from the foundation of Constantinople by Constantine the Great in 330.

Thus, the post-Classical period of Greek refers to the creation and evolution of *Koiné* Greek throughout the entire Hellenistic and Roman eras of history until the start of the middle Ages.

The linguistic roots of the Common Greek dialect had been unclear since ancient times. During the Hellenistic age, most scholars thought of *Koiné* as the result of the mixture of the four main Ancient Greek dialects (**Aeolic, Doric, Ionic and Attic**).

*Ἡ ἐκ τῶν τεττάρων συνεστῶσα* (the composition of the Four).

# *Ἡ ἐκ τῶν τεττάρων συνεστῶσα*

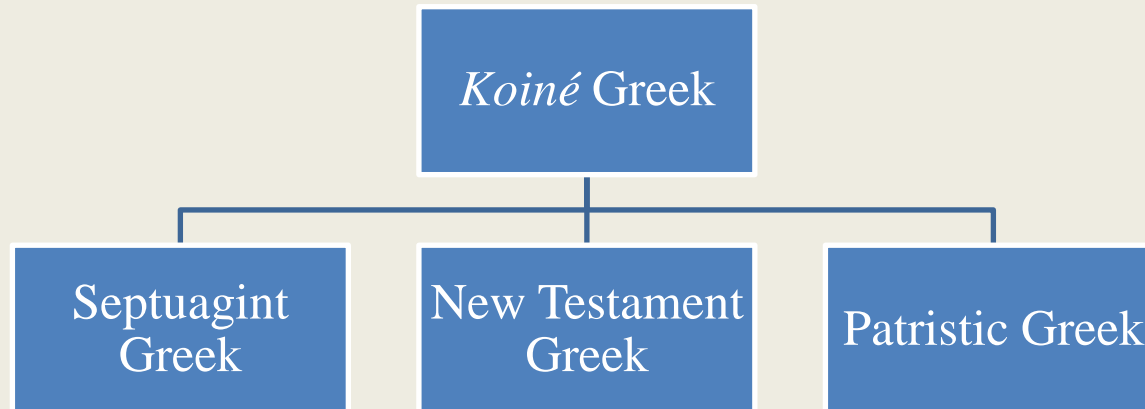
## **The composition of the Four**

This view was supported in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, while others scholars considered *Koiné* to be a simplified form of Ionic dialect. The final answer was given by the Greek linguist G. N. Hatzidakis, who proved that, despite the "composition of the Four", Attic dialect is the basis of *Koiné* Greek.

In other words, *Koiné* Greek can be regarded as Attic with the admixture of elements especially from Ionic, but also from other dialects.

The degree of importance of the non-Attic linguistic elements on *Koiné* might vary depending on the region of the Hellenistic World. In that respect, the varieties of *Koiné* spoken in the Ionian colonies of Asia Minor would have more intense Ionic characteristics than others and those of Laconia and Cyprus would preserve other characteristics, respectively.

# Sources of *Koiné* Greek



## *Septuagint Greek*

There has been some debate to what degree biblical Greek represents the mainstream of contemporary spoken *Koiné* and to what extent it contains specifically Aramaic features. These could have been induced either through the practice of translating closely from Hebrew or Aramaic original texts, or through the influence of the regional non-standard Greek spoken by the originally Aramaic-speaking Jews.

## *New Testament Greek*

The Greek of the New Testament is less distinctively Semitic than that of the Septuagint, because it appeared 300 years later.

## *Patristic Greek*

The term *patristic Greek* is sometimes used for the Greek written by the Greek Church Fathers, the Early Christian theologians in late antiquity. Christian writers in the earliest time tended to use a simple register of *Koiné*, relatively close to the spoken language of their time, following the model of the Bible. After the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire, more learned registers of *Koiné* also came to be used.

# The traditional text

First of all it is necessary to understand what is meant by the term 'traditional text'. During the 1<sup>st</sup> century following the resurrection of Christ, God moved men to pen His Word (2 Peter 1:21). The result was a group of letters and books, written in *Koiné* Greek.

These letters and books were copied and recopied throughout the centuries and distributed throughout the world. These copies comprise the manuscripts of the New Testament. Over 5,000 of these Greek manuscripts have survived to this day. The great number of these Greek manuscripts supports what is called the Byzantine textual tradition, Byzantine because it came from all over the Greek-speaking world at that time.

These Byzantine manuscripts make up what is called the Traditional Text of the New Testament. In addition to the manuscripts, we also have available many works in which numerous Church Fathers quoted from the manuscripts.

# Why is it important to know Greek when studying the Bible?

*The languages are the sheath in which the sword of the Spirit is contained." God sovereignty chose to have His Word written in Hebrew (the Old Testament) and Greek (the New Testament).*

(Martin Luther King)

- Authority and clarity
- Spiritual and psychological balance
- Deeper insight into the message of the New Testament
- Access to primary resources



# Lost in translation

Modern English translations are excellent. However, in any translation, not everything that was communicated in the original language can be precisely translated in another language. As a result, a translation rarely is a perfect rendering of the original.

An example related to the "*aspect*" of the Greek verbs.

English verbs have tenses (past, present, and future). Verbs of *Koiné* Greek have similar tenses, but they also have what is known as "*aspect*". Certain aspectual distinctions express a relation in time between the event and the time of reference. This is the case with the perfect aspect, which indicates that an event occurred prior to the time of reference. Present tense Greek verbs mean more than the action is occurring presently. A Greek verb can also carry the meaning that the action is occurring continually or repeatedly. This is lost in English unless the aspect word "continually" or "repeatedly" is added to the translation along with the verb.



# Lost in translation?

(...) καὶ **μὴ μεθύσκεσθε** οἴνω, ἐν ᾧ ἐστὶν ἀσωτία, ἀλλὰ  
**πληροῦσθε** ἐν Πνεύματι.

(...) *and **do not get drunk** with wine, for that is  
dissipation, but **be filled** with the Spirit.*

(Eph. 5:18)

In the original Greek text, both verbs are in Present tense stating to continually be filled and do not get drunk. It is not therefore, a one-time event. It is a lifelong process. This "aspect" is lost in the English translation.

# An example with the Present Perfect Tense

The Present Perfect Tense is the most difficult of Greek tenses to understand and to interpret.

- That is due to the fact that it has been explained as being a combination of the two tenses, the **aorist / past** and the **present**.
- In other words, the present perfect tense implies a past action and affirms an existing result,
- and / or expresses the continuation of completed actions.

Τοῦτο ἀληθὲς εἶρηκας. (John 4:19)

- This you say truly
- This you have said truly

The verbal form εἶρηκας refers to an action in the past which has a present or continuing result.

- (she) said
- (she) still says

# The **emphasis** of the translation

When we translate perfect tense forms into English:

-We use forms with “has” or “have” if the **emphasis** is on the past action.

Τοῦτο ἀληθὲς εἶρηκας - This you have said truly.

-We use a present tense when the **emphasis** is on the present result.

Τοῦτο ἀληθὲς εἶρηκας - This you say truly.