

# Teaching Ancient Greek for a Theology Faculty

by Cressida Ryan

500 years ago Erasmus oversaw the founding of the Collegium Trilingue, concentrated around teaching and learning Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, as key scriptural languages. The University of Nottingham Faculty of Theology has an informal Greek, Hebrew, and Latin reading group to continue such a tradition. How often, however, does the Bible in ancient languages feature on the reading list of a Classics course? Studying Ancient Greek has always been part of a greater narrative about the development of academic disciplines, and the stratification of education into phases. Theology Faculties include many staff and students who have previously studied under the guise of Classics. Beginners' language teaching is a skill most often developed in Modern Foreign Languages, or in schools, and universities are increasingly drawing on the expertise of those with school teaching experience to help with the flourishing beginners' courses. I have moved between Classics and Theology, between schools and universities, and have found the different disciplines and pedagogical phases could offer a lot to each other, and do offer a lot to me. As we continue to strive for multidisciplinary collaborations in our research and teaching, and attract good students to our courses (when languages can sometimes be represented as off-putting), I think it is worth pausing to think about these different crossovers. Reflecting on teaching Greek beyond Classics gives plenty of food for thought, and possibly even some ways to re-approach Classical courses.

Greek has a very different status within Theology to Classics. When students are faced with the option of learning Greek, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Arabic or Pali, Greek is often viewed as the easier and more relevant choice in most cases. Where Latin is on offer, it has a different status, as it is not a primary biblical language. What Latin would you teach students who want to read the Vulgate, Bede, and Augustine?

My students sometimes remark that their Classics friends say they are not learning proper Greek. While it's true that learning NT Greek will not equip them to read Homer or Plato, they are learning the Greek they need to read the texts they need, and it is not necessarily true that a Classicist will find the New Testament easy to read in any case. I myself have had comments about not teaching 'proper' Greek. What is 'proper' Greek though? As the [Polis Institute](#)<sup>1</sup> in Jerusalem note,

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<sup>1</sup> All urls were correct when last accessed, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2018.

concentrating on Koine is not a poor choice, given that 90 percent of extant Ancient Greek literature was written in it.<sup>2</sup> It is an unfair and shortsighted comment, and there are many positive reasons for concentrating on the area.

The textbooks are largely American, which makes them harder to access for British students; key differences include a reliance on drills over reading, a focus on grammar which can come across as overly prescriptive, and, of course, the different case orders in paradigms. The most widely used British book available is decades old (Wenham-Duff *Elements of New Testament Greek*). Grammar is introduced in a different order to most Classical Greek courses, with little attention paid to aspects which are not used much within the extant texts. The optative, for example, gets just half a page in the textbook.

We begin to see the back influence of Latin more clearly, grammatically and lexically. Deponency begins to be more of an issue, becoming something Greek scholars argue about and students despair about. Mark uses κεντυρίων three times, but 20 times in the New Testament Matthew, or Luke (Gospel and Acts) use ἑκατόναρχος or a related term, as New Testament writers try either to transliterate or translate and calque Roman words and concepts. This Hellenising process continues with e.g. Luke's use of ἡ δραχμη in 15:8-9 (three instances, the only ones in the New Testament). This isn't a currency which would be relevant to the audience, but is relevant to the language in which the story is being told.

This tension between the language of the culture and the language of the text continues clearly throughout the New Testament. Most of the New Testament is written by non-native writers of Greek. Each book, therefore, carries the colour of the author's own linguistic background and much is written in Greek which feels slightly unnatural. It is particularly hard to read the New Testament without knowing any Hebrew. From the constant interjections ἀμην and ἰδου, to the use of ἐγενετο to start stories (and therefore often trigger indirect constructions), to the wholesale incorporation of Hebrew quotations (particularly in the Letter to the Hebrews), the language of the New Testament is redolent of Hebrew and only really makes sense when read in the light of some Hebrew learning. We also find levels of polyptoton beyond what even Greek would consider usual, and prepositions stretched beyond all normal dictionary definitions. I am therefore learning Hebrew, which in turn probably helps my Greek teaching in giving me a sense of what it is like to learn a language from scratch again.

Simple differences include the range of vocabulary learned. Words like τηρεω and διακονεω tend not to feature highly in Classical beginners' courses, but are central to understanding the New Testament. Known words such as ἐκκλησια and ἁμαρτια

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<sup>2</sup> See the introduction to their textbook *Polis: Speaking Ancient Greek as a Living Language, Level One, Student's Volume* (2015), and my [review](#) (Journal of Classics Teaching Volume 18 Issue 36, published online 5th December 2017).

have a different baggage, with their Christian interpretation prioritised over any top LSJ entry.

The very spelling of some words can mark a difference in approach between Theology and Classics. Theology texts will usually read γινεται where Classical ones read γιννεται. Both are attested even in 'Classical' Greek, and both are used until the Eighteenth Century, when what seems to be a largely disciplinary split emerged: Theologians adopted γινεται and Classicists γιννεται. A further split becomes important for those interested in textual criticism and its ability to reveal more 'authentic' texts, for example the debate, exemplified in this 2017 [blog posting](#) by Daniel B. Wallace, over the use of γεινεται in the new Tyndale House Greek New Testament.

Concentrating one main Greek strand (Koine) also allows students to become more familiar with it than they would trying to balance, for example, Homeric, Doric, and Attic Greek. This allows us to read the text at speed at a relatively early stage in an undergraduate's Greek career. Within one term of starting, students are ready to read the New Testament with some ease. This early exposure to real, unadapted texts is a real motivator. Students are even less likely to be selected for linguistic aptitude or for their potential interest in languages than in even the most non-linguistic Classical Studies course. While the majority of Theology courses do place heavy emphasis on language learning, it is not an aspect of the course that appeals to students or even registers on their horizons. Even at Oxford my students admit it can feel like a chore, burden, or necessary evil, but they surprise themselves by enjoying it. This pattern is repeated [at Cambridge](#). This conversion to linguistic study makes for particularly rewarding teaching.

It is vital that translation comparison is built sensitively into the course in a way in which it is not so obviously an issue in Classics. In my first year of teaching Theologians one student came up and said 'I checked the text after the lesson and that's not what it says'. Students think they know the text, and can recite perfect published translations, and need careful management to convince them to pay attention to the Greek. Assessment has to be designed to take this into account. Students have a personal commitment to a translation, often the one used at their church (or even just the department recommended one, which in our case is the NRSV). Intellectually students come to appreciate the problems posed by the New Testament being written in Greek, but emotionally they may still gravitate towards the translation they know. Learning to read the Greek sometimes risks provoking a crisis of faith in new undergraduates at a time of transition in their lives when perhaps their faith is also being tested. There is a different kind of pastoral sensitivity needed when teaching the Gospels as opposed to Homer.

A good percentage of my students are either training for ministry, hoping to do so, or in some case are already ministers. Their motivation for learning Greek is very different to the average undergraduate's; it really matters that they understand the text well. Their very identity is bound up with doing so. At this point it is also

relevant that I am Catholic in a way which is less of an issue in a Classics department; my understanding of the New Testament is coloured as much by my own faith background as it is by my understanding of the Greek, and my students and I have to understand where and why we agree to differ.

Similarly, textual criticism is useful and important from the outset. The King James Bible uses a different set of texts to the NRSV, NIV and other more modern translations. When thinking about the text and its influence on culture and doctrine, students really do need to think about which text is being translated.

Texts and commentaries are readily available online. Websites such as [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) and [www.academicbible.com](http://www.academicbible.com) are invaluable. There are a whole host of text specific resources for reading and analysing the text which simply aren't available for most Classical texts. The application of tech to text can put Classics to shame. Tools such as Bibleworks and Accordance are hugely expensive, but extremely powerful. TLG is wonderful, but these text-specific things are staggering.

I may know more about Greek than any of my students, but particularly with the seminarians and graduate students, they are bound to know more about doctrine than I do. While students often have sharper specific knowledge on an area given their essay deadlines or research interests, this issue is heightened when working in a department whose core topics one never studied at all, particularly when these topics may already be the livelihood of one's students. If handled carefully, however, the result is that I learn alongside my students and find teaching them particularly intellectually rewarding.

### **What about working in the Theology department?**

While [Theology and Religious Studies UK](#) offers some of the same disciplinary support at the CUCD, there is no direct equivalent to the CA, no equivalent to the Classics List. It is far harder to get a sense of the subject across the country, fragmented as it is between universities and many theological training centres. The collegiality which consequently permeates Classics is missing at the macro level, which makes it hard to ensure the health of the subject at a linguistic level. The will is often there, however, and I think Classicists may underestimate just how much Latin and Greek is being taught by their colleagues.

As Classics departments are often split into disciplinary subfaculties, with the term 'Classics' an awkward overarching title, so too Theology department are variously called Divinity, Theology, Religion, Religious Studies, and are split into areas such as Old Testament, New Testament, Study of Religions, Ethics, Science and Religion, for example. Departments may seem partly like umbrellas, which is not dissimilar to Classics, but each wing is itself likely to be interdisciplinary. Graduate students come from all over the HE landscape, including Classics, which leaves little room for assumed common ground, and plenty of room for very fertile intellectual crossover.

Some of the key research areas sometimes feel like they are asking the same research questions, and applying the same research methods, as Classics in the 1980s (or in terms of reception, 2000s). Different disciplinary styles clearly apply, but there is more to it than that. I recently heard my colleague, Prof Jenn Strawbridge, give an excellent seminar on ‘Bad Exegesis’, which dealt with the question of the validity of reception studies within biblical scholarship. She linked it to the study of relics, as different kinds of artefacts whose authenticity had an important truth value, and whose effect is an important area of study. Biblical exegesis carries a culturally transformative value in a way thinking about Homer is far less likely to - it isn’t preached from the pulpit on a weekly basis. The questions Theology needs to ask may feel like ones Classics has partly dealt with, but they’re in such a different context that exciting new research is inevitable.

The relationship with secondary education is also strained, in a related but different way to Classics. Religious Studies may be prioritised on the National Curriculum in a way that Classical subjects are not, but this brings its own tensions. It is not always well-taught in schools, given that it is mandatory and teaching staff are stretched. Students are often put off by this. Religious Studies at school is also not a good match for the contents of most degrees in the area. The school courses focus heavily on ethics, whereas all undergraduate studies require some kind of textual work, whatever religious tradition one focuses on. Classics may be a contentious term (see, here, [Jo Quinn’s talk](#) at the 2017 Women’s Classical Committee-UK AGM), but Theology also has its own nomenclature issues. Theology, Religion, Religious Studies, Divinity: which of these best describe a subject which is variously both an intellectual pursuit transcending commitment to any particular faith position and the training in those faiths? Religious Education may be mandatory, but Religious Studies has not counted towards the EBacc, and it therefore faces some of the same teaching pressures as Classics. Outreach remains vital, but unlike in Classics, no serious, national outreach has yet been managed.

Teaching Greek for a Theology Faculty is a wonderful job to have. It allows me to wallow in the language, and convince students to love and value it for both academic and personal reasons. Focussing on one kind of Greek and its application to a particular set of texts has pedagogical advantages. There are significant challenges, some of which are shared with Classics, but some of which are unique to the discipline.

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