



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Benjamin Kantor The Pronunciation of New Testament Greek

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Keywords: Review, Koine Greek Phonology

<https://doi.org/10.64830/001c.146591>

Journal of Language, Culture, and Religion

Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2025

Kantor, Benjamin. 2023. *The Pronunciation of New Testament Greek*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 841 pp.

Kantor, Benjamin. 2023. *A Short Guide to the Pronunciation of New Testament Greek*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 132 pp.

Two 2023 volumes from Benjamin Kantor aim at the same target from different angles. *The Pronunciation of New Testament Greek* reconstructs the sound system of Judeo-Palestinian Koine, focusing on the early Roman period (ca. 37 BC–135 AD). *A Short Guide to the Pronunciation of New Testament Greek* distills those results for teachers and students, pairing a brisk phonology primer with per-phoneme discussions and practical reading. Kantor bases his reconstruction of the sound system of Greek in this period on two bodies of evidence: orthographic variation and cross-language transliterations.

For the orthographic data, he looked at common misspellings, involving vowel confusions and confusion between aspirates and fricatives.¹ These are dealt with systematically in the larger volume in chapters 7 and 8, which constitute the vast majority of the material in the book (*Pronunciation*, pp. 93–767). These interchanges, when they recur consistently, can imply phonetic shifts in the language. For instance, there is a common grave inscription ἐνθάδε κείται “here lies” followed by a name. In the Koine period, “sometimes it is misspelled κῑται, which indicates that εῖ was equivalent to ι in this context, both being pronounced as IPA [i]. In other cases, it is misspelled as κῑτε, which indicates that αῖ was equivalent to ε in this context, both being pronounced as [ε]” (*Pronunciation*, p. 12).

Of course, there are some factors that greatly complicate the analysis. For instance, the less well-trained the scribe or epigrapher was—or at least the less conservative he was in spelling conventions—the better the data; put inversely, highly trained literary scribes are less likely to engage in spelling variation of a helpful nature. Also, purely accidental spellings must be

¹ For example, δ primarily interchanges with ζ, θ, τ, and σ (*Pronunciation*, pp. 122–26).

eliminated from the data. Given the nature of language change and the widespread use of Greek in the eastern Mediterranean world, there was also regional variation, with Egypt over-represented in the surviving papyri because of its dry climate.

Alongside the orthographic evidence, Kantor examines transliterations. Chief among these are Origen's *Secunda* (i.e., the Hexapla's Greek-letter transliteration of the Hebrew text) and the various transliterations (mostly names) embedded in the LXX and in Judeo-Palestinian multilingual inscriptions. There are other bidirectional borrowings, too, between the relevant Semitic languages, Latin, and Greek. None of these languages marks exactly the same set of phonemes, of course, but they give us points of triangulation. Taken in aggregate, the spellings form a kind of net of correspondences that constrains plausible values for Koine Greek sounds and, in the other direction, offers checks on Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin phonology as well.

The results of Kantor's exhaustive work are as follows. With regard to consonants, most consonants were pronounced approximately as in Modern Greek (and Erasmian pronunciation) except: β [β]/[v]; γ [γ] and [j];² δ [d]; ϕ [p^h]/[ϕ];³ χ [k^h]; θ [t^h]. That is, the voiced and aspirated stops are in the process of becoming fricatives; β and γ have already shifted, ϕ is in transition, while δ , χ , θ have not yet shifted. Palatalization of velars before front vowels was likely underway (cf. Modern Greek). Also as in Modern Greek, voiceless stops appear to voice after nasals, though the nasals may still have been pronounced.⁴

He concludes that the vowels and diphthongs were pronounced rather like this: α [α]; $\varepsilon = \alpha\iota$ ⁵ [ε]; η [e]; $\iota = \epsilon\iota$ [i]; $\upsilon = \omicron\iota$ ⁶ (= $\upsilon\iota$) [y]; $o = \omega$ [o]; ou [u]. Other diphthongs ending in υ ($\alpha\upsilon$, $\epsilon\upsilon$, $\eta\upsilon$) ended in [β] or [ϕ], perhaps with some lip rounding. This is close to modern pronunciation, though in Modern Greek the second element of these diphthongs has, like β and ϕ become labiodental ([v]/[f]).⁷

2 "The fricativization of γ is one of the earliest and farthest-reaching consonantal developments of the Hellenistic period" probably having become mainstream by the second century BC (*Pronunciation*, p. 109). Before front vowels it is palatalized as [j].

3 "Greek ϕ seems to have maintained its aspirated realization of $/p^h/$ during the Roman period in Judeo-Palestinian" (*Pronunciation*, p. 145). In Italy, however, transcriptions with f begin in the first century AD.

4 That is $\mu\pi$ would be pronounced [mb], [b] with preceding nasalization of the vowel or [bb] (*Pronunciation*, p. 116); in Modern Greek it becomes [b] (*Pronunciation*, p. 86).

5 Kantor concludes that the monophthongization of $\alpha\iota$ happened by the end of the 2nd century BC in Egypt; by the 1st century BC in Miletos, the 1st century AD in Magnesia, and everywhere by the 2nd century evidence (*Pronunciation*, pp. 404–5).

6 The collapse of $\omicron\iota$ to $/y/$ probably happened later than $\alpha\epsilon$ to $/\varepsilon/$ but had already shifted by the 2nd century AD evidence (*Pronunciation*, p. 420).

7 It is unclear exactly when the shift from bilabial to labiodental occurred (*Pronunciation*, pp. 145–46).

Kantor's counsel for what to do in the classroom is pragmatic. Use speaking and listening in the classroom, pronouncing Greek as Greek speakers likely did. That is, adopt either a historically reconstructed Koine or Modern Greek and use it to animate reading and listening (*Short Guide*, p. 113–22). In my experience, a flexible approach works: reconstructed Koine (e.g., Buth/Polis-style) or Modern Greek yields gains in prosody, accentuation, and lexical access. I do not, however, insist that every student abandon Erasmian, provided accent placement is respected and basic vowel quality is not distorted (e.g., *o* as [o] or [ɔ] not [a]).

Kantor has set out to reconstruct Judeo-Palestinian Greek in the early Roman period; he is not attempting to describe a universal “Koine.” The tight focus is a strength, and it marks the boundaries of Kantor's claims. Other regions will have different timelines for the shift from aspirated and voiced stops to fricatives or for the itacistic shifts in the vowels. Readers must keep this in mind; this is not describing all Koine Greek everywhere. Taken on its own terms, I expect the large work will stand as a leading reference for Judeo-Palestinian phonology in the early Roman period. It can also serve as a template for similar studies focused on other regions or timeframes. Specialist scholars will want to investigate the larger work, while the *Short Guide* will be more readily useful for Greek teachers and some interested students.

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Submitted: October 31, 2025 CST. Accepted: November 01, 2025 CST. Published: December 09, 2025 CST.



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