Introduction 0.1.1: The Greek language

Languages, like the cultures that sing, speak, and write them, change continually. When we attempt to define the forms, the diction, the structure, or the pronunciation, of a language no longer spoken, all we can aspire to achieve is reasonable approximation. The history of the Greek language is well attested, in some respects, by the abundant documents that have survived, and yet there are innumerable gray areas that make all our labels relative. How to define precisely the temporal boundaries or the features of ancient Greek or those of *koinê* Greek? The best answer to this complex question is simplistic but practical. We should follow the tradition adopted in linguistics, history, history of religion, academic use, and so forth, and be tolerant of inaccuracies.

The language spoken by the migrants who in prehistoric times settled in the territory that we call "Greece" but did not become Greece until many centuries later, is generally called "ancient Greek." We happen to have a later witness of one of the variants of the Greek of those early periods, the Ionic dialect. This witness is the version of the Homeric songs that fixed a long and fluid oral tradition. The language of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is Ionic but it has traces of other dialects as well. Other similar examples could illustrate this fundamental trait of Greek: it was comprised of a multitude of dialects, which developed both in their own right and by merging with other dialects... what we call ancient Greek was itself a common (*koinê*) language.

On account of the political, military, and cultural predominance of the city of Athens (in the region known as Attica), by the fifth century BCE, a further merging of Greek dialects resulted into what is generally known as **classical Greek**. Once more, this language represents basically the Attic dialect, but it is also a "common" result of cultural blending. Learning classical Greek is synonymous with learning Attic. Other dialects, to some degree artificially preserved in various literary genres, are studied only by linguists and classicists who wish to read lyric and epic poetry and the history of Herodotus as well as the Attic prose of Plato, Demosthenes, or Aristotle.

In Hellenistic times a new linguistic blending occurred, prompted by the political and cultural unification that resulted from Alexander's conquests. This is Hellenistic Greek, the **common (*koinê*) Greek** of the Septuagint and the New Testament, i.e. Biblical Greek. How colloquial some of these texts are is an issue that scholars have discovered and debated in recent times. What no one disputes is that, even though Alexander was Macedonian, his own dialect was a small ingredient of *koinê*, where, once again, because of the cultural (if no longer political) dominance of Athens it was the Attic dialect that prevailed.

This does not mean, of course, that the features of Attic Greek remained constant in *koinê* Greek. How could they? Languages, I said above, change continually. Yet there are enough shared features to make the study of Attic, i.e., classical or ancient Greek, a solid foundation for the study of Biblical or *koinê* Greek. This is particularly true in an elementary course such as this one. As we move on through grammar and idiom, I will point out some important differences between the two periods of the Greek language.