

Introduction to Ancient Greek

Unit 01 01

The history of the Greek alphabet
Learn some Greek letters!

The History of the Greek Alphabet

- Understanding a little about the history of the Greek alphabet helps explain why Greek writing looks the way it does, and why our alphabet looks the way it does, too.
- In the eighth century B.C., the Greeks began adapting a Phoenician writing system to record Greek.
- The Greeks changed the system by dropping consonants that they did not need and adding characters for vowels (not recorded in Phoenician), thus creating the world's first true alphabet.

The History of the Greek Alphabet



Greek and Phoenician “colonies” when Greeks adapted the Phoenician writing system

	,
	B
	G
	D
	H
	W
	Z
	H.

	T.
	Y
	K
	L
	M
	N
	S
	,

	P
	S.
	Q
	R
	Š
	T

The Phoenician
characters and their sounds

PROTO-CANAANITE	EARLY LETTER NAMES AND MEANINGS	PHOENICIAN	EARLY GREEK	EARLY MONUMENTAL LATIN	MODERN ENGLISH CAPITALS
	<i>alp</i> oxhead				A
	<i>bēt</i> house				B
	<i>gaml</i> throwstick				C
	<i>digg</i> fish				D
	<i>hē(?)</i> man calling				E
	<i>wō</i> (<i>waw</i>) mace				F
	<i>zē(n)</i> ?				
	<i>hē(t)</i> fence?				H
	<i>tē(t)</i> spindle?				
	<i>yad</i> arm				I
	<i>kapp</i> palm				K
	<i>lamd</i> ox-goad				L
	<i>mēm</i> water				M
	<i>nahš</i> snake				N
	<i>cēn</i> eye				O
	<i>pi't</i> corner?				P
	<i>sa(d)</i> plant				
	<i>qu(p)</i> ?				Q
	<i>ra'š</i> head of man				R
	<i>tann</i> composite bow				S
	<i>tō</i> (<i>taw</i>) owner's mark				T
	(<i>tau</i>)				I

Without vowels, the opening lines of the *Odyssey* look like this in the Phoenician script:

“Tll m, Ms, f th mn f mn ws,
wh ws drvn fr jrns, ftr h hd
scked Trs scrd ctdl”

In a full alphabet with vowels and consonants, the lines can now be rendered like this:

“Tell me, Muse, of the man of
many ways, who was driven
far journeys, after he had
sacked Troy’s sacred citadel”.

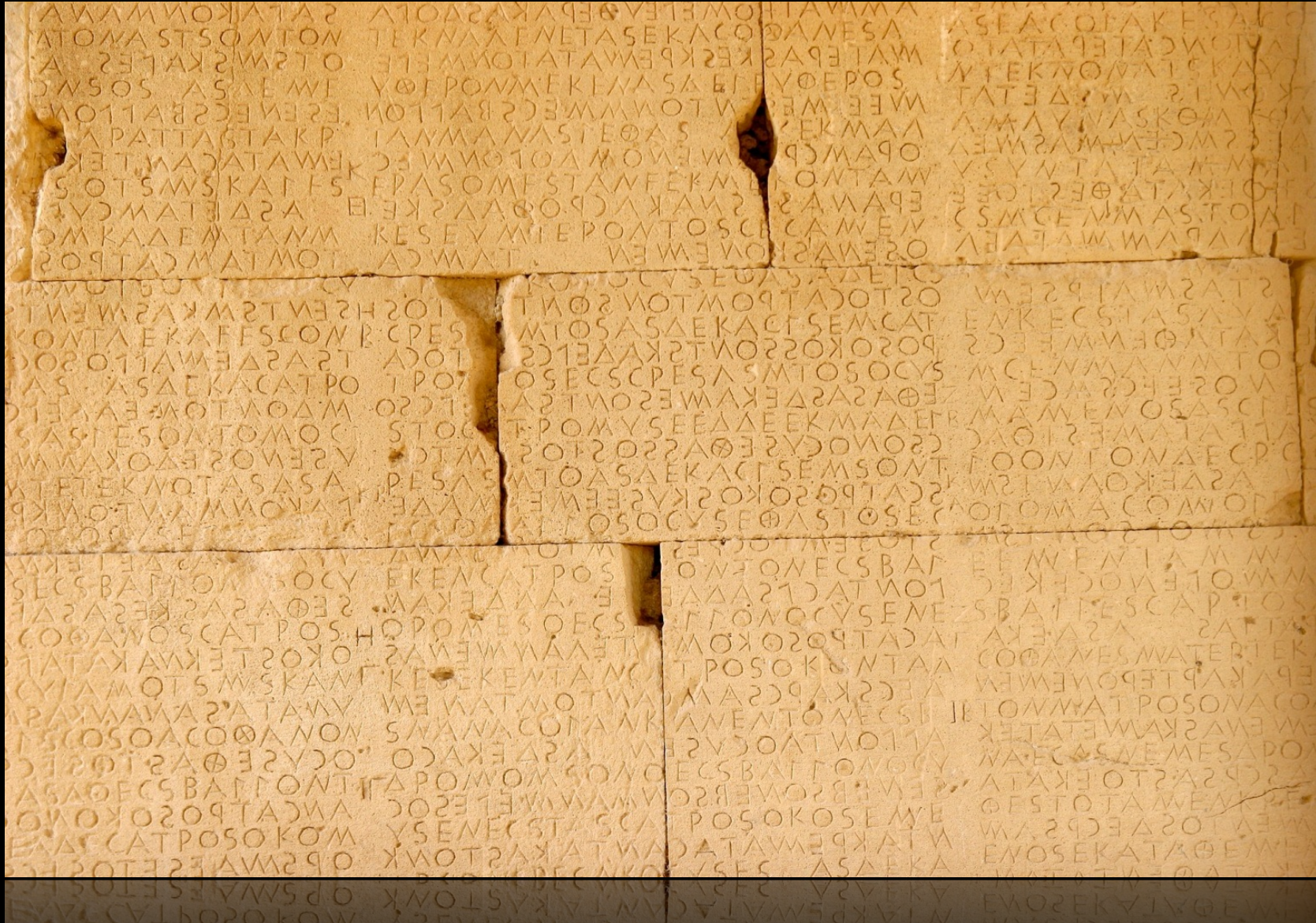
The History of the Greek Alphabet

- Each Greek community used a slightly different version of the alphabet.
- Each Greek community used the alphabet to record only their local dialect.
- Initially, there was no set standard for the direction of script in general
 - left to right, right to left, *boustrophedon* (alternating the writing direction by each line)...
- For centuries, different communities would use their own sets of letters and versions of letters.

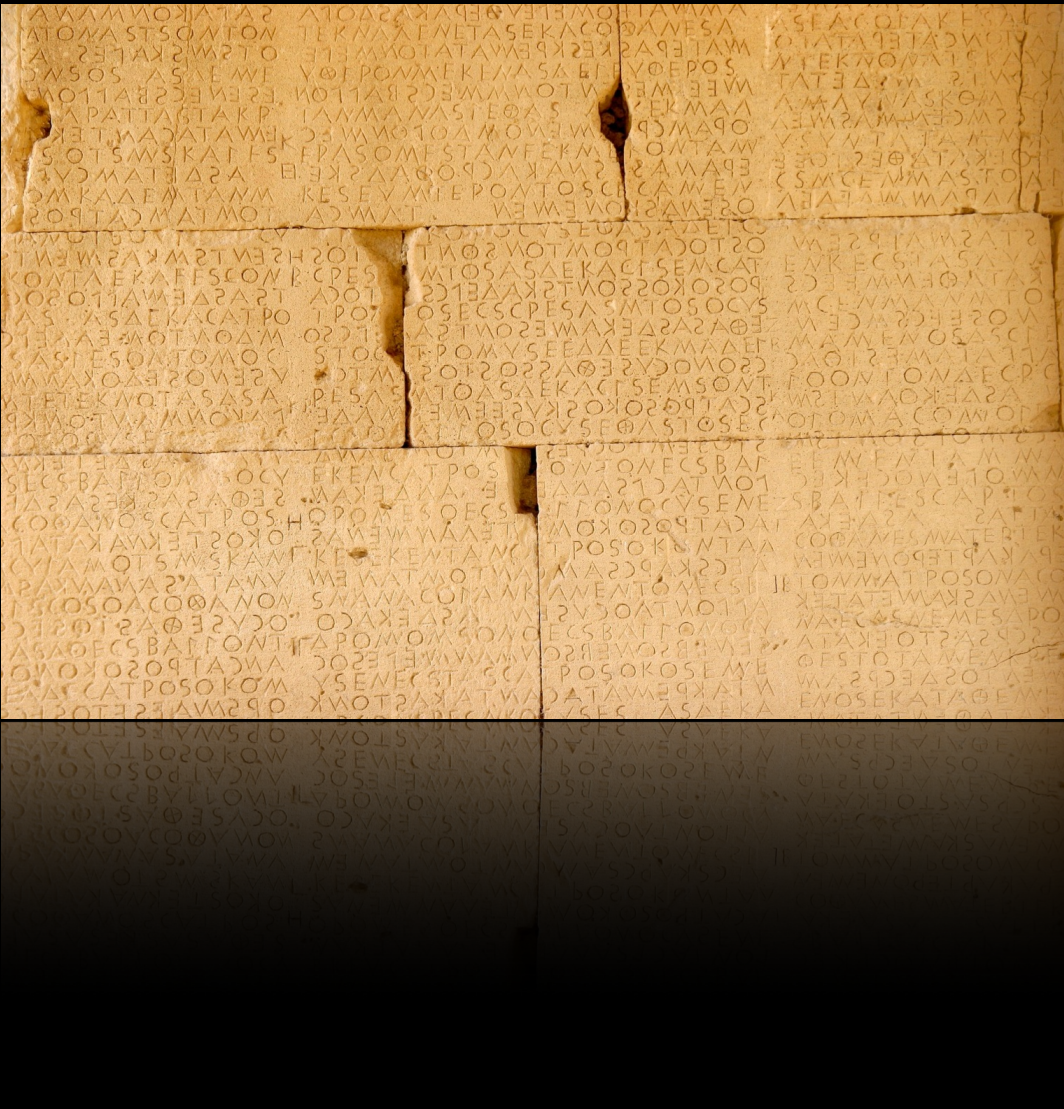
	Ionia	Athens	Corinth	Argos	Euboea	Modern
alpha	ΑΑ	ΑΑ	ΑΑ	ΑΑ	ΑΑ	Α α
beta	Β	Β	𐀀	𐀁	Β	Β β
gamma	Γ	Λ	<C	𐀃Λ	<C	Γ γ
delta	Δ	Δ	Δ	𐀅	𐀆	Δ δ
epsilon	ϜϜ	ϜϜ	𐀈	ϜϜ	ϜϜ	Ε ε
digamma		Ϟ	Ϟ	ϞϞ	Ϟ	
zeta	Ζ	Ζ	Ζ	Ζ	Ζ	Ζ ζ
eta	ΘΗ					Η η
heta		ΘΗ	ΘΗ	ΘΗ	ΘΗ	
theta	⊕⊗⊙	⊕⊗⊙	⊕⊗⊙	⊕⊗⊙	⊕⊗⊙	Θ θ
iota	Ι	Ι	Ξ	Ι	Ι	Ι ι
kappa	Κ	Κ	Κ	Κ	Κ	Κ κ
lambda	𐀃Λ	𐀄	𐀃Λ	𐀅	𐀄	Λ λ
mu	ΜΜ	ΜΜ	ΜΜ	ΜΜ	ΜΜ	Μ μ
nu	ΝΝ	ΝΝ	ΝΝ	ΝΝ	ΝΝ	Ν ν
xi	Ξ		Ξ	Ξ	Χ	Ξ ξ
omicron	Ο	Ο	Ο	Ο	Ο	Ο ο
pi	Π	Π	Π	Π	Π	Π π
san			Μ	Μ	Μ	
koppa	Ϟ	Ϟ	Ϟ	Ϟ	Ϟ	
rho	ΡΔ	ΡΡ	ΡΡ	ΡΡ	Ρ	Ρ ρ
sigma	Σ	Σ		Σ	Σ	Σ σς
tau	Τ	Τ	Τ	Τ	Τ	Τ τ
upsilon	ΥΥ	ΥΥΥ	ΥΥΥ	ΥΥΥ	ΥΥΥ	Υ υ
phi	Φ	Φ⊕	Φ⊕	Φ⊕	Φ⊕	Φ φ
khi	Χ	Χ	Χ	Χ	ΥΨ	Χ χ
psi	ΥΨ		ΥΨ	Ψ		Ψ ψ
omega	Ω					Ω ω
οωιςδρ	Ζ Σ					Ζ Σ Ϟ

Examples of different Greek alphabets

5th c. B.C. Law Code of Gortyn, Crete
written *boustrophedon*
(left to right and right to left alternate each line)



5th c. B.C. Law Code of Gortyn, Crete written *boustrophedon* (left to right and right to left alternate each line)



THIS EXAMPLE OF BOUSTROPHEDON TEXT WAS
WRITTEN SPECIFICALLY FOR THE WIKIPEDIA
ARTICLE ON THIS OX TURNING METHOD OF
COVERING A WALL WITH TEXT IN ANCIENT
GREECE AND ELSEWHERE

GREECE AND ELSEWHERE

COVERING A WALL WITH TEXT IN ANCIENT

The History of the Greek Alphabet

Classical Greek often specifically refers to writings from the city of **Athens** during the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.

- In 403 B.C., the city of Athens adopted spelling reforms, and adopted the Ionic Greek alphabet.
- Because of the influence of Attic Greek, the Ionic alphabet eventually became the standard starting point for written Greek.
- Even older writing was rewritten using the Ionic alphabet.

The History of the Greek Alphabet

The **upper case** letters:

- In the Classical period, the alphabet survives solely as an **upper case** alphabet. Most writing that survives from this period are inscriptions on stone or clay vessels.
- Even as people started writing more on papyrus (on early type of paper made from the papyrus reed), they initially still used **upper case** letters.

The History of the Greek Alphabet



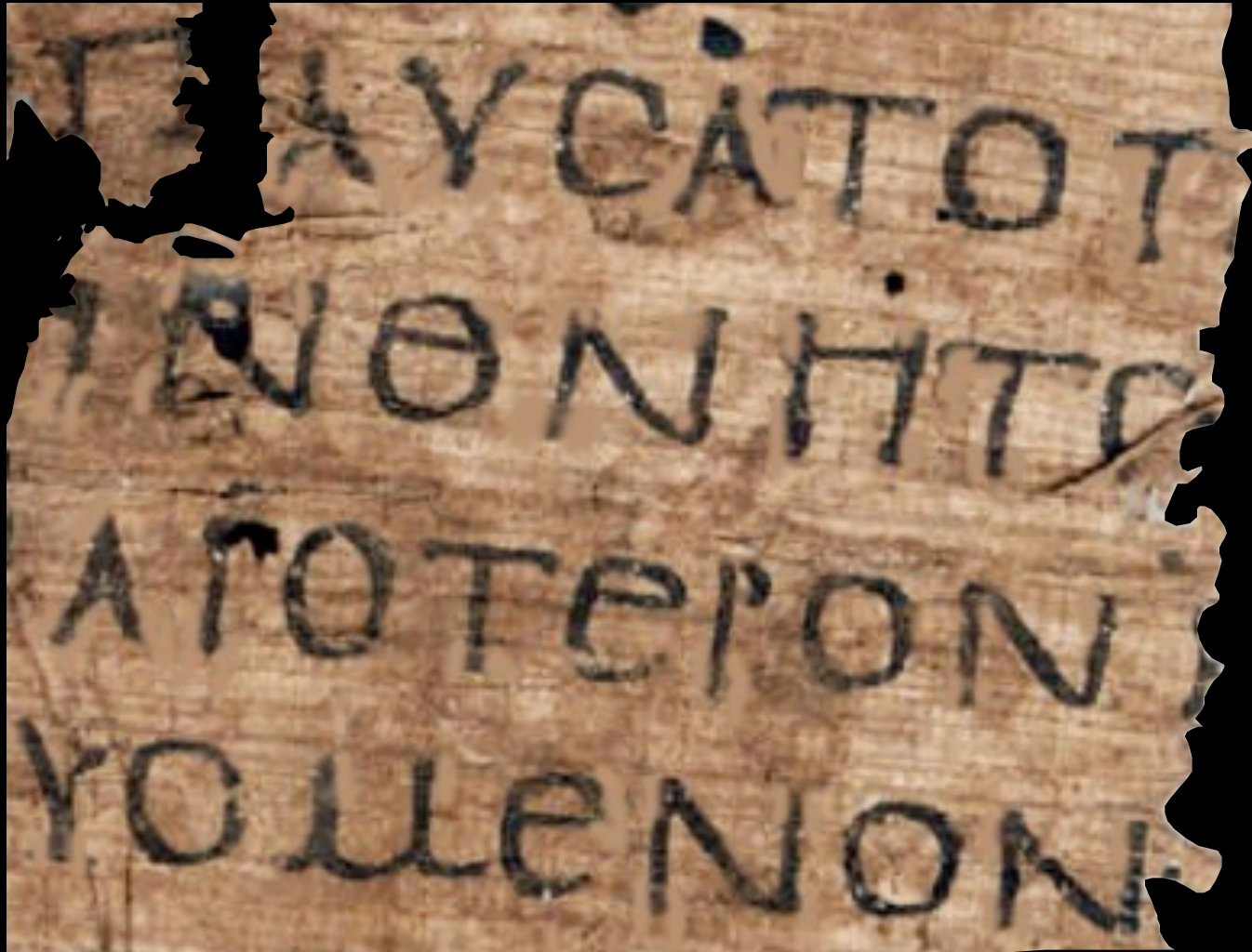
sherd from Mt. Hymettos showing someone practicing
the alphabet, ca. 700 B.C.

The History of the Greek Alphabet



Kylix (drinking cup) from Athens decorated with the alphabet, ca. 550 B.C.

The History of the Greek Alphabet



papyrus from Plato's *Politicus*
P.Oxy. LX 5107

The History of the Greek Alphabet

The **lower case** letters:

- As writing on papyrus, and later on paper, became more common, scribes gradually changed the letters to make them easier to write.
- This version of the alphabet became what we learn as the **lower case** alphabet.
- Scribes retained the upper case forms for special uses and decoration.

The **lower case** letters appear in the hand-writing from later manuscripts, with **upper case** letters for special uses.

δέ, ὥς ἐ τοῖς τοιοῦτοις, μή δέχεσθαι ἥν αἰ
εἰς οἰκίαν· μή δὲ λείψιν τοῖς τοιοῦτοις,
χαίρειν. Ἐ οὕτως ἡμεῖς τὴν ἐπιστολήν.

ΤΟΥ Ἁγίου ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ Ἐπιστο-
λή δυνάστα.

Ο Προβύταρ ὁ ἐκλεκτὴ κυρία
ἔ τοῖς τέκνοις αὐτῆς, ὡς ἐγὼ ἀγα-
πῶ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ, ἔ οὐκ ἐγὼ μόνος, ἀλλὰ
ἔ πάντες οἱ ἐγνωκότες τὴν ἀλήθειαν
τὴν μένουσαν ἐν ἡμῖν. ἔ μετ' ἡμῶν ὅτι
εἰς τὸ αἰῶνα. ὅτι κατ' ἡμῶν χρῖς, ἡμεῖς
ἡμεῖς, πρὸς θεοῦ πατρὸς, ἔ πρὸς κυρίου
ΙΗΣΟΥ Χριστοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ πατρὸς, ἐν
ἀληθείᾳ ἔ ἀγάπῃ. Ἐ χρῖν λίαν, ὅτι δι-
ρηκὰς ἐκ τῶν τέκνων σου πόρρι παύωται ἐν
ἀληθείᾳ, καὶ ὡς ἐντολὴν ἡγάγομεν πρὸς

manuscript of 2 John 1.1-4

The Classical Greek alphabet for the modern printing press

Greek Letter	Equivalent to	Name of Letter	Pronounced like the italicized letter(s) in the English word:	
A α	a	ἄλφα	alpha	aha
B β	b	βῆτα	beta	better
Γ γ	g	γάμμα	gamma	gamble; before γ, κ, μ, ξ, χ = nasalized <i>n</i> [or before μ = gamble]
Δ δ	d	δέλτα	delta	delete
E ε	e	ἒ ψιλόν	epsilon ¹	edge
Z ζ	z	ζῆτα	zeta	wisdom [or gadzooks]
H η	ē	ῆτα	eta	air [or aim]
Θ θ	th	θῆτα	theta	sweetheart [or author]
I ι	i	ιώτα	iota	pizza [or ι = pit; ῖ = pizza]
K κ	k, c	κάππα	kappa	candy
Λ λ	l	λάμβδα	lambda	lantern
M μ	m	μῦ	mu	music
N ν	n	νῦ	nu	nuclear
Ξ ξ	x	ξῖ	xi	taxi
O ο	o	ὀ μῖκρόν	omicron	orphan
Π π	p	πί	pi	pillow
P ρ	r	ῥῶ	rho	rocky—rolled or trilled -r
Σ σ, ς	s	σίγμα	sigma ²	signal; before β, γ, δ, μ = z
T τ	t	ταῦ	tau	tardy
Υ υ	y, u	ῦ ψιλόν	upsilon	French <i>u</i> [or υ = foot; ῡ = boot]
Φ φ	ph	φῖ	phi	uphill [or telephone]
X χ	kh, ch	χῖ	chi	backhand [or German -ch]
Ψ ψ	ps	ψῖ	psi	tipsy
Ω ω	ō	ὦ μέγα	omega	often [or open]
Ϝ ϝ	Ϟ ϟ	Ϡ ἡελα	ομμεδδ	ομεμ [οι οδεμ]

ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ Β

Salutation

1 Ὁ πρεσβύτερος ἐκλεκτῇ κυρίᾳ καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις αὐτῆς, οὓς ἐγὼ ἀγαπῶ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ, καὶ οὐκ ἐγὼ μόνος ἀλλὰ καὶ πάντες οἱ ἐγνωκότες τὴν ἀλήθειαν, 2 διὰ τὴν ἀλήθειαν τὴν μένουσαν ἐν ἡμῖν καὶ μεθ' ἡμῶν ἔσται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.^a 3 ἔσται μεθ' ἡμῶν χάρις ἔλεος εἰρήνη παρὰ θεοῦ πατρὸς καὶ παρὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ πατρὸς ἐν ἀληθείᾳ καὶ ἀγάπῃ.^b

Truth and Love

4 Ἐχάρην λίαν ὅτι εὑρηκα ἐκ τῶν τέκνων σου περιπατοῦντας ἐν ἀληθείᾳ, καθὼς ἐντολὴν ἐλάβομεν παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς. 5 καὶ νῦν ἐρωτῶ σε, κυρία, οὐχ ὡς ἐντολὴν καινὴν γράφων σοι ἀλλὰ ἣν εἶχομεν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, ἵνα ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους. 6 καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγάπη, ἵνα περιπατῶμεν κατὰ τὰς ἐντολάς αὐτοῦ· αὕτη ἡ ἐντολή ἐστίν, καθὼς ἠκούσατε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, ἵνα ἐν αὐτῇ περιπατήτε.^c 7 ὅτι πολλοὶ πλάνοι ἐξῆλθον εἰς τὸν κόσμον, οἱ μὴ ὁμολογοῦντες Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐρχόμενον ἐν σαρκί· οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ πλάνος καὶ ὁ ἀντίχριστος.^d 8 βλέπετε

¹ 3 {A} παρὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ AB Ψ 048 0232 81 322 323 436 1067 1243 1409 1735 1739 1846 1852 I 596 (it^m vg Christou Ἰησοῦ) vg^{ms} cor^{ss} eth geo // παρὰ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ B² 33 945 1175 1844 2298 2344 2464 Byz [K L P] Lect vg^{ms} (vg^{ms} sy^{tr} [ph], h cor^{ph}, bo^{ms} arm slav // κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ B² 1292 1611 1881 2138 I 680 I 883 I 884 // Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ 1505 it^l (vg^{ms}) Augustine Cassiodorus

² P: RSV TEV FC NIV Lu REB NRSV ³ P: TR WH AD NA M NIV VP REB NRSV ⁶ P: NA M TEV FC NIV REB NRSV // S: Seg VP Lu NJB TOB ⁷ P: Lu

¹ ἐγὼ ... ἀληθείᾳ 3 Jn 1 ⁴ Ἐχάρην ... ἀληθείᾳ 3 Jn 3 ⁵ οὐχ ... ἀρχῆς 1 Jn 2:7, 2:24; 3:11 ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους Jn 13:34; 15:12, 17; 1 Jn 3:11 ⁶ αὕτη ... ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ Jn 14:15, 23, 24; 1 Jn 5:3 ⁷ πολλοὶ ... κόσμον Mt 7:15; 1 Jn 2:18; 4:1 οἱ ... ἀντίχριστος 1 Jn 4:3

From manuscript to modern printed edition

Printed editions
began as reproductions
of manuscripts,
so modern editions
generally retain this use of the
lower and **upper case** letters.

ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ Β

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^a 2 P: RSV TEV FC NIV Lu REB NRSV ^b 3 P: TR WH AD NA M NIV VP REB NRSV ^c 6 P: NA M TEV FC NIV REB NRSV // S: Seg VP Lu NJB TOB ^d 7 P: Lu

1 ἐγὼ ... ἀληθείᾳ 3 Jn 1 4 Ἐχάρην ... ἀληθείᾳ 3 Jn 3 5 οὐκ ... ἀρχῆς 1 Jn 2:7, 2:24; 3:11 ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους Jn 13:34; 15:12, 17; 1 Jn 3:11 6 αὕτη ... ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ Jn 14:15, 23, 24; 1 Jn 5:3 7 πολλοὶ ... κόσμον Mt 7:15; 1 Jn 2:18; 4:1 οἱ ... ἀντίχριστος 1 Jn 4:3

The Spelling of Ancient Greek

An essential principle about the ancient Greek alphabet: **SPELL IT LIKE IT SOUNDS!**

- All Greek communities spelled words the way they pronounced them.
- If the pronunciation of a word changed over time, so too did the spelling.

The Spelling of Ancient Greek

- Consider the verb “record” (reCORD) and the noun “record” (RECORD), which are spelled alike but pronounced differently in English.
- In Greek, such words would be spelled according to their pronunciations: “rikórd” and “rékerd”

The Spelling of Ancient Greek

Imagine these examples in English:

- If anyone pronounced “going” as “gonna,” they would spell it “gonna.”
- Homophones like “but” and “butt” would both be spelled “but,” even though they have different meanings.

The Spelling of Ancient Greek

Therefore, know with confidence that:

1. Each word is pronounced as it is spelled.
2. Each word can be spelled as it is pronounced.

The Greek Alphabet:

Vowels

Now we start learning the Greek alphabet.

- In English, the consonants tend to dominate
- In Greek, the **vowels** are more important.

So we start with the **Greek vowels**.

The Greek Alphabet:

Vowels

Vowels:

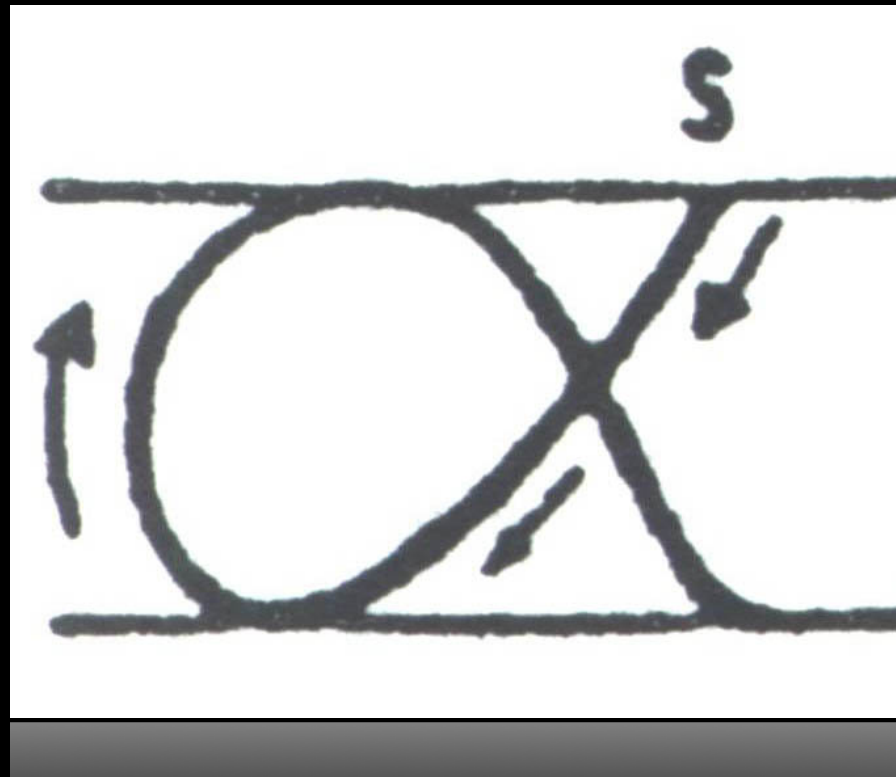
Greek has roughly the same five vowels as English:

- α “ah”
- ε “eh”
- ι “ih”
- ο “o”
- υ “u”

The Greek Alphabet:

Vowels

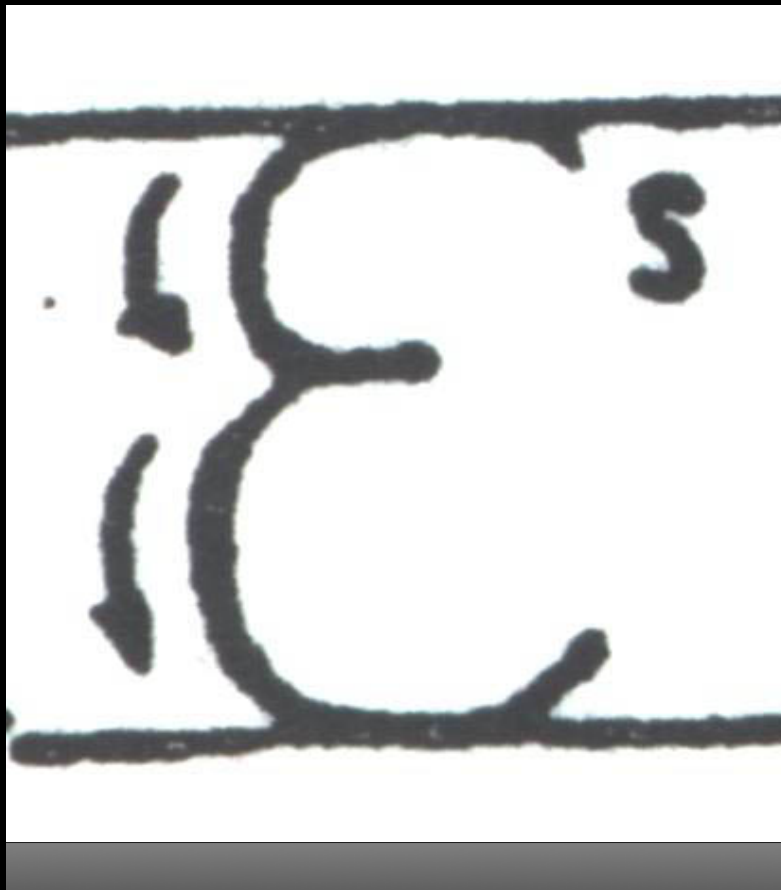
A α “alpha” = “ah” = **A a**



The Greek Alphabet:

Vowels

Ε ε “epsilon” = “eh” = Ε ε



The Greek Alphabet:

Vowels

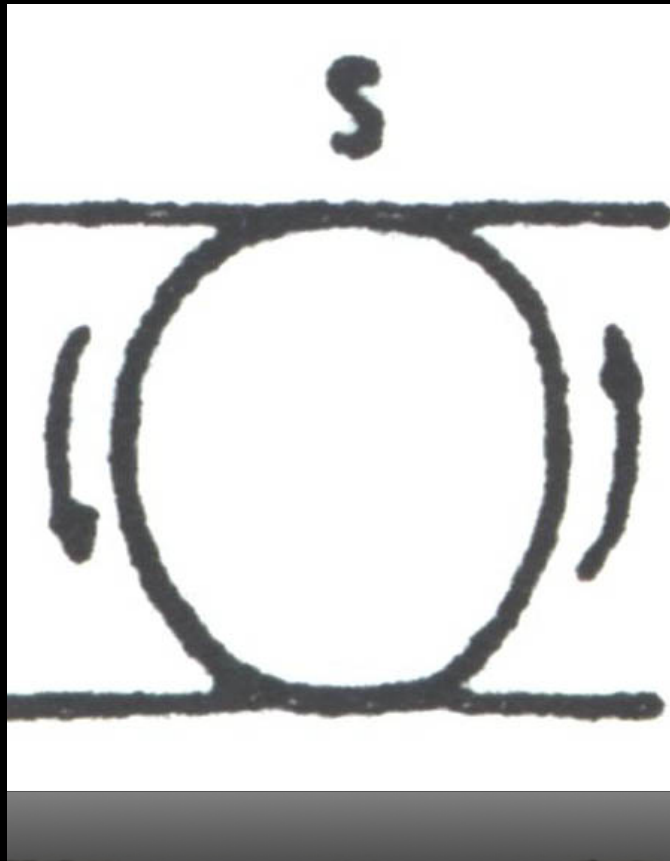
Ι ι “iota” = “ih” = Ι ι



The Greek Alphabet:

Vowels

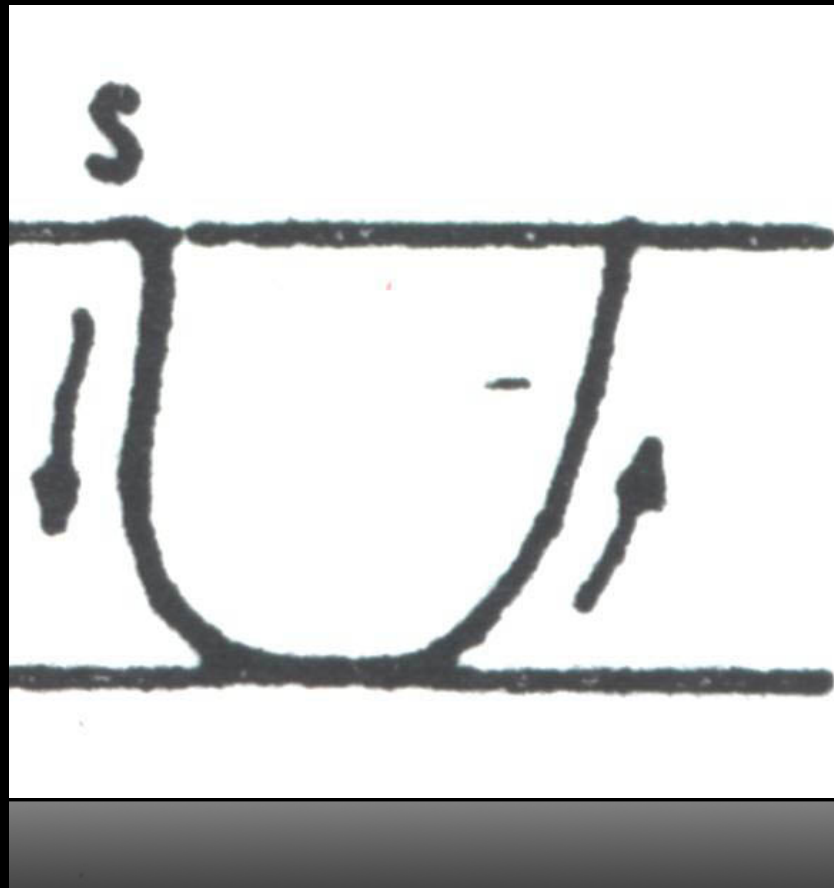
Ο ο “omicron” = “o” = Ο ο



The Greek Alphabet:

Vowels

Υ υ “upsilon” = “u” = Y y



The Greek Alphabet:

Vowels

Short

- α “ah”
- ε “eh”
- ι “ih”
- ο “o”
- υ “u”

Long

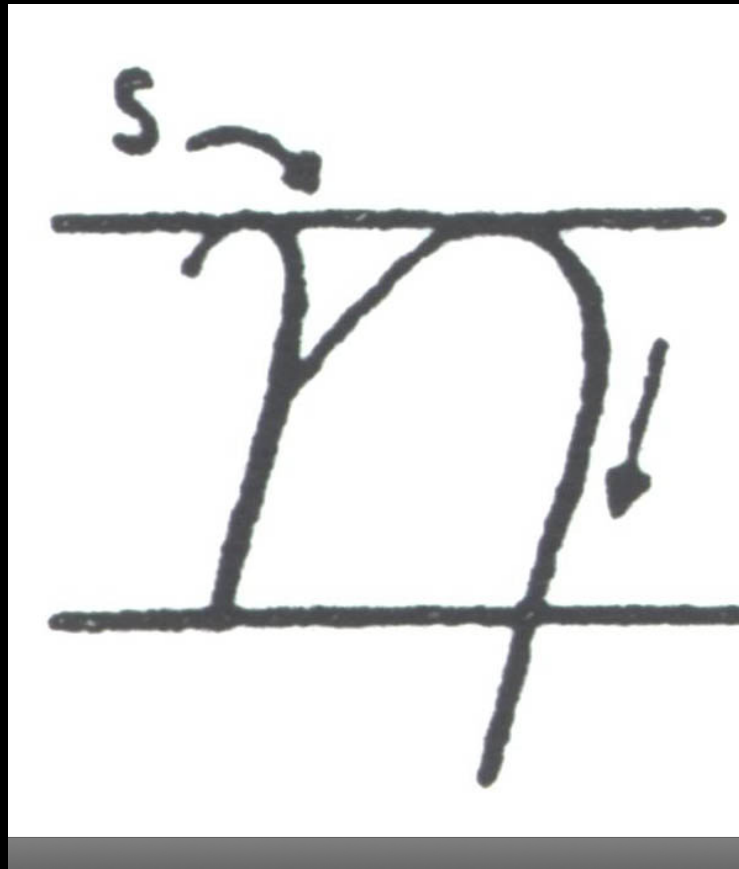
- ᾱ “aah”
- ῆ “ay”
- ῑ “ee”
- ω “oh”
- ῡ “ooh”

Like English, Greek has **short** and **long** versions of its vowels.

The Greek Alphabet:

Vowels

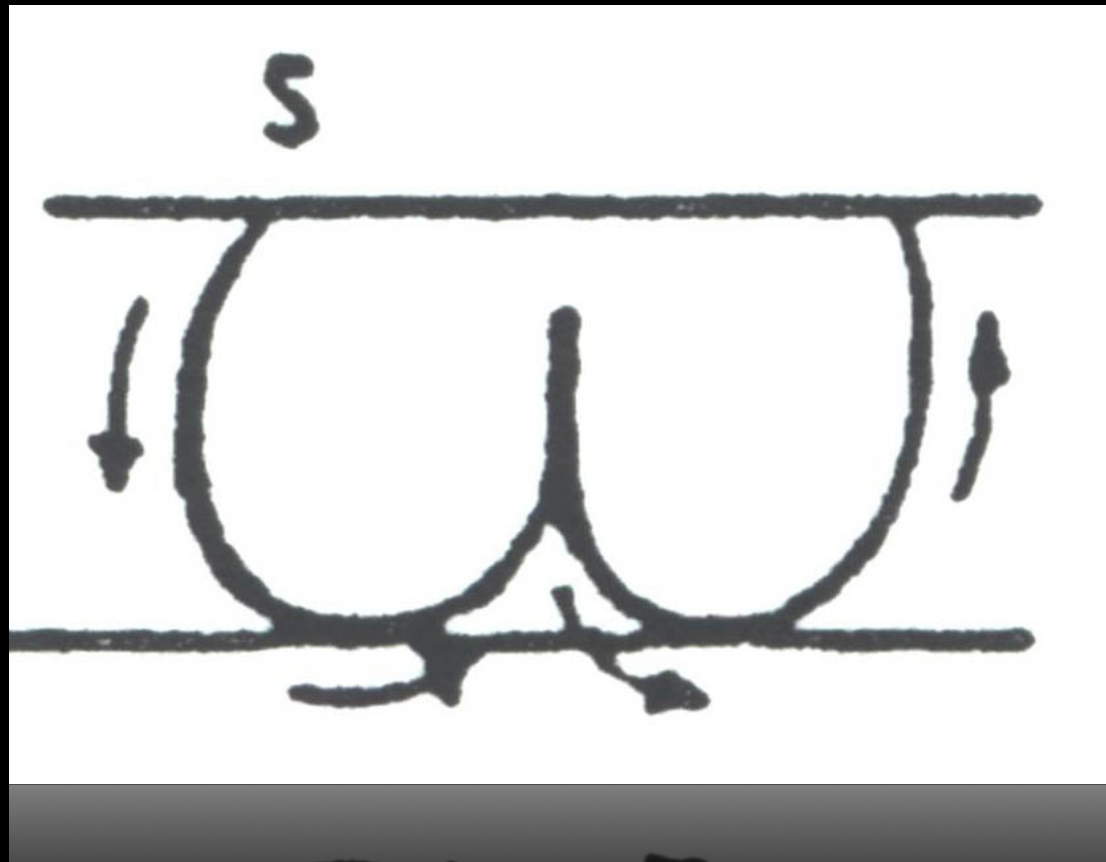
H η “eta” = “ay” = E e



The Greek Alphabet:

Vowels

Ω ω “omega” = “oh” = O o



The Greek Alphabet:

Two Vowels

Two vowels in a row:

Speakers of Ancient Greek did not like to pronounce two different vowel sounds in a row.

If two vowels came together, they tended to:

- pronounce the two vowels as one (called a **diphthong**, Greek for “double sound”).
- or **contract** the vowels into one vowel or diphthong.

Specifically:

- Any vowel + **ι** or **υ** forms a diphthong.
- The vowels **α**, **ε** and **ο** contract with each other.

The Greek Alphabet:

Diphthongs

A vowel + ι forms a diphthong:

- $\alpha + \iota = \alpha\iota$ “eye”
 - $\bar{\alpha} + \iota = \bar{\alpha}\iota$ “aah” usually written α
- $\varepsilon + \iota = \varepsilon\iota$ “ay”
 - $\eta + \iota = \eta\iota$ “ay” usually written η
- $o + \iota = o\iota$ “oy”
 - $\omega + \iota = \omega\iota$ “oh” usually written ω
- $u + \iota = u\iota$ “wee”

The Greek Alphabet:

Diphthongs

A vowel + **υ** forms a diphthong:

- **α** + **υ** = **αυ** “ow!”

- **ε** + **υ** = **ευ** “eu”

- **ο** + **υ** = **ου** “oo”

The Greek Alphabet:

Contracting Vowels

α , ε and \omicron + α contract:

- $\alpha + \alpha = \bar{\alpha}$

- $\varepsilon + \alpha = \eta$

- $\omicron + \alpha = \omega$

The Greek Alphabet:

Contracting Vowels

α , ε and \omicron + ε contract:

- $\alpha + \varepsilon = \bar{\alpha}$
- $\varepsilon + \varepsilon = \varepsilon\iota$
- $\omicron + \varepsilon = \omicron\upsilon$

The Greek Alphabet:

Contracting Vowels

α , ε and $o + o$ contract:

- $\alpha + o = \omega$

- $\varepsilon + o = ou$

- $o + o = ou$