

# Hebrew Streams

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## Koiné Greek Transliteration

The Koiné Period of Greek extends from 330 BC to AD 330. This is the period of *common* or *universal* [κοινῆ *koine*] Greek. It began with the conquests of Alexander the Great of Macedonia (334–320) and ended with the breakup of the Roman Empire. During this era, Greek became the international language of commerce and diplomacy, especially after the Romans conquered the Hellenistic world and extended the influence of Greek culture.

### Hebrew Bible into Greek

Jews living in Alexandria (named after the Macedonian conqueror), Egypt, translated the Hebrew Pentateuch (five books of Moses) into Koiné Greek around 250 BC. The other portions of the Bible were apparently completed by 132 BC.

This extremely important work is known as the Septuagint or “Translation of the *Seventy*” (the number of Jewish scholars in Alexandria who reportedly did the work). It’s abbreviated by Roman numerals for 70, LXX. In time, most Jews of the Mediterranean Diaspora either spoke Greek or at least read the Scriptures in translation. Because of the Septuagint, the Scriptures and faith of Israel were spread throughout the ancient world.

After the first century, other Jewish scholars rendered the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Their versions are named (by modern historians) after themselves: Aquila (AD 130, a disciple of Rabbi Akiba), Symmachus (AD 170, a Jewish Ebionite), Theodotion (end of 2d cent.).

### Jesus and the Greek New Testament

It is not verifiable but possible that Jesus was tri-lingual: Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic. He could converse with Romans in Greek, the rabbis in Hebrew, and the people of Israel in Aramaic. By the middle of the first century AD, many believe, the words of Jesus were translated from Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek and written down in collections then put into narratives known as “gospels,” literally “evangel” (Grk *euangelion*, good tidings).

Jesus’ Jewish “apostles” (Grk *apostoloi*, messengers, ambassadors) then spread the “gospel” message to the Jewish Diaspora and Greek-speaking Gentile world using the universal language of the day. Though the apostles knew the Bible in Hebrew, they usually quoted the Septuagint version with their listening audiences or readers. This explains why some quotations from the Hebrew Bible cited in the NT vary.

The New Testament has come down to us in Koiné Greek, the earliest manuscript portion dating to AD 100–120. About 5,400 distinct fragments or complete manuscripts of the NT exist—more than any other ancient document.

The authors of Luke–Acts and the book of Hebrews are linguistic masters of Koiné, while the author of the book of Revelation knows the Greek only roughly and as a second language, not as his mother tongue (which was Hebrew).

**Background Sources:** K. Aland and B. Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (trans. E. Rhodes, 2d ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); B. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (3d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

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A table of Greek letters appears on page 2. Lists of vowels, diphthongs, accents, breathing marks, and samples of Greek Scriptures follow on page 3.

## The Letters

Small	Capital	Uncial	Name	Pronunciation
α	Α	Ⲁ	alpha	a, as in f <u>a</u> ther
β	Β	Ⲃ	beta	b
γ	Γ	Ⲅ	gamma	g, as in go (not generous)
δ	Δ	Ⲇ	delta	d
ε	Ε	Ⲉ	epsilon	e, as in g <u>e</u> t
ζ	Ζ	Ⲋ	zeta	z (or dz as in add <u>s</u> )
η	Η	Ⲍ	eta	ay, as in d <u>a</u> y
θ	Θ	Ⲏ	theta	th, as in <u>th</u> ing
ι	Ι	Ⲑ	iota	i (short: as in h <u>i</u> t; long: as in s <u>ee</u> )
κ	Κ	Ⲓ	kappa	k
λ	Λ	Ⲕ	lambda	l
μ	Μ	Ⲗ	mu	m
ν	Ν	Ⲙ	nu	n
ξ	Ξ	Ⲛ	xi	x, as in ax <u>e</u>
ο	Ο	Ⲝ	omicron	o, as in n <u>o</u> t
π	Π	Ⲟ	pi	p
ρ	Ρ	Ⲡ	rho	r
σ ς	Σ	Ⲣ	sigma final sigma	s s
τ	Τ	Ⲥ	tau	t
υ	Υ	Ⲧ	upsilon	oo or ü, as German ü
φ	Φ	Ⲙ	phi	f
χ	Χ	Ⲟ	chi	ch, as in Hebrew n <i>het</i>
ψ	Ψ	Ⲡ	psi	ps, as <u>lip</u> s
ω	Ω	Ⲣ	omega	o, as in n <u>o</u> te

## Accents and Breathing Marks

1) Greek has three accents: acute [ ´ ], grave [ ` ], and circumflex [ ˆ ].

θεός  
θεὸς  
φῶς

2) Words beginning with vowels or diphthong have a *breathing mark*, either *rough* or *smooth*. A rough mark [ ´ ] shows that the initial vowel/diphthong is preceded by an “h” sound, as in ὁ υἱός *ho huíos*, the son. A smooth breathing mark [ ˆ ] has no effect on pronunciation, as in ἐν ἀρχῇ *en arche*, in (the) beginning.

## Vowels, Diphthongs, and Special Consonant Combinations

1) The seven vowels are: α ε η ι ο υ ω

2) Diphthongs are two vowels pronounced as one syllable. The diphthongs are:

αι = ai, as in aisle  
ει = ei, as in day (some grammarians pronounce it “ai” as in height)  
οι = oi, as in oil  
αυ = ow, as in cow  
ευ = oo, or ü as in feud  
ου = oo, as in food  
υι = we, as queen

3) When gamma – γ – occurs before another γ or κ or χ, it is pronounced as “n”:  
(αγγελος *angelos*: angel, messenger)

## Two Greek Texts

### Genesis 1:1 [LXX, Septuagint]

*Fully accented* (modern printing)

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν

*Uncial* (“capital”) letters are the form used in the earliest Greek texts by Jewish and Christian scribes. Note: no spaces were written between words. Here is Genesis 1:1 in uncial font:

ΕΝΑΡΧΗΕΠΟΙΗΣΕΝΘΕΟΤΟΝΟΥΡΑΝΟΝΚΑΙΤΗΝΓΗΝ

In many uncial manuscripts, the divine names are abbreviated. Here, the Θ̅C̅ represents Θ̅Ε̅Ο̅C̅ *theos*, “God.” These are called the “nomina sacra” or sacred names. This Christian practice follows customary Jewish reverence for the name of God.

### Matthew 1:1

βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ Δαυὶδ υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ

ΒΙΒΛΟCΓΕΝΕCΕΩCΙΥΧΥΥΙΟΥΔΑΥΙΔΥΙΟΥΑΒΡΑΑΜ

The genitive forms of the names “Jesus” [Ἰησοῦ, *Ieson*] and “Christ” [Χριστοῦ, *Christou*] are abbreviated in many uncial manuscripts as ΙΥ [IU] and ΚΥ [KU].