

Book Review: *A Reader's Greek New Testament*  
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The best thing you can do to improve your ability to read NT Greek, after you have learnt the basic grammar and a small vocabulary, is to read the GNT every day. Do you see the Catch-22? You only get better at reading Greek by reading Greek but reading Greek is what you're struggling with. That's a problem! Fortunately, there is help at hand.

The best way to read the GNT regularly when you are not yet a fluent reader, is to use a reader's GNT. So here I'm reviewing one of these. As far as I know, there are five different GNTs of this sort and *A Reader's Greek New Testament* (RGNT), published by Zondervan, was the grandmother of them all.

So first: what is a *reader's* GNT? Surely all GNTs are meant for readers? The basic concept of these books is to present the text of the GNT with all the vocabulary that occurs fewer than a certain number of times glossed on the same page where the word appears. This means you don't have to keep paging through a dictionary to find unfamiliar words. The more common words, which aren't glossed on the page, are listed at the back. That's it; that's what all readers' GNTs have in common. I'll get into how they differ in a moment, but for now: why is it so important to have less frequent vocabulary right on the page?

Several GNTs have dictionaries at the back. That's fine, but while it's certainly more convenient than carrying a separate dictionary around with you, you still have to look up unfamiliar words one by one. No matter how quick you are at doing this, it takes a lot of time. In the introduction to the RGNT, its compilers note that someone who knows all the words occurring in the GNT fifty times or more will still be facing 5118 unfamiliar words. Given the frequency with which these words recur, each verse will contain an average of 3.5 unfamiliar words. If you aimed to read the whole NT in Greek over the course of a year, you'd be checking the dictionary 77 times a day. Time yourself looking up some words: you'd be spending a lot of time paging back and forth rather than reading.

This sobering fact should be enough to convince you that you will learn much more Greek and more quickly gain ease in reading if you use a reader's edition. The question then becomes: which one? There are five that I know of. They differ, first, with respect to which Greek text they present; second, in the threshold for what words they gloss on the page; third, whether they provide parsing as well as glossing; fourth, how the gloss is laid out on the page; fifth, in the number of alternative meanings they typically supply for any given word; and sixth, in their physical features, such as trim size and binding.

So what approach does the RGNT take? Its Greek **text** exists nowhere else in non-electronic form: it's 'the eclectic text that underpins the New International Version' (9). This might sound worrisome: is the Greek you're going to be reading one that is only related to a specific translation? Well, no, as it turns out, since at the foot of each page, below the glosses, any point at which this Greek text differs from the UBS/NA28 (the standard academic text) is noted. If you leaf through the RGNT, you'll see there aren't very many discrepancies between the two and a lot of these are very minor. So essentially, the RGNT offers you the standard eclectic text, that of the UBS and the NA.

The **glossing threshold** is 30x: all words occurring fewer than 30 times are glossed on the page, with the others glossed at the back. Only one reader's GNT glosses words occurring more than 30 times. The trade-off is that the lower threshold inevitably

increases the book's size and if you read regularly, you shouldn't need those extra glosses for long.

**Parsing:** the four other GNTs provide parsing. The RGNT does not. For some, the absence of parsing might be decisive vote against it, but I'd argue that it's actually a strength, for a couple of reasons. The first is that providing parsing takes space and you have to consider whether a bulkier book is a good trade-off for the additional help. Second, in terms of what is a good use of your time and energy to memorise, I'd suggest a thorough knowledge of verb forms should be your top priority. Every verb you encounter in the text shows in its morphology how it is functioning grammatically and what it means. The return for the time you invest in morphology is going to be much greater than the return for learning less and less common items of vocabulary.

The problem with providing parsing is that it may easily lead to complacency and that you will rely on the parsing rather than taking a moment to scrutinise the form and use your own knowledge to figure it out for yourself. The more you do that, the more you will internalise the morphological signals so that you don't have to wrestle with every one. You might object 'Aren't there some forms that are so weird, you just never would figure them out for yourself?' Sure, but for the most part, the fact that the gloss gives you the lexical form means that very often you'll see what the stem is and from there be able to figure out the rest for yourself. Then, too, the oddest forms are usually of the most common verbs (this is true of all European languages) and you're going to learn those through sheer repetition. Finally, any form that really baffles you can be looked up easily online. Bible Hub's Interlinear feature, for example, gives the full parsing for every flexed form in the GNT. Since you shouldn't need to consult this very often, as your Greek improves, the saving in space and the avoidance of giving help on which you may become dependent, probably makes the RGNT preferable to three of the other Reader's editions. (One of them isolates parsed forms in a section of their own, separate from the glossing. If you're going to have parsing, this is a better way to do it, in my view.)

**Page layout:** some Reader's editions put the glossing on separate lines at the bottom of the page; one puts the glosses in a separate column on the side of the page. The RGNT puts the glosses at the bottom of the page, but not on separate lines. I find it's easy enough to locate what you want with the aid of the note numbers but some people dislike the continuous text. Here again, it's a matter of a trade-off: it's a matter of whether you find it inconvenient not to have each gloss on a separate line versus the bulk that results from so much empty space on each page.

**Extent of glossing:** Most reader's GNTs provide only a couple of glosses for each word. For some words there may be only one possible gloss: 'sea anchor' or 'centurion', for example. Many words, though, do have a number of possible meanings and by choosing only one or two alternatives, most reader's GNTs are actually making interpretative decisions for you and encouraging you not to think about which meaning would be the right one in context. They're also not teaching you vocabulary as well as is desirable: you need to know the range of meanings a word can have. The RGNT offers much fuller glossing than three of the alternative editions and somewhat fuller glossing than the fourth. Although the plethora of meanings may at times slow you down a little, it's slowing you down in the cause of making you think: you have to consider what the appropriate meaning is, given this context. It also means that if this is one of the more

frequently appearing words, you are being shown the range of meanings it can have and as you are repeatedly exposed to it and it begins to become part of your working vocabulary, you won't be tied to only one of its senses. In my view, you'll learn much more from having fuller glosses than having parsing.

**Physique:** There is a huge disparity between the size of the RGNT and all the alternatives. The RGNT's height and width are not much different from three of the four others, but its width, and therefore, weight, are markedly different. This is partly down to the fact that it doesn't put glosses on separate lines, thereby increasing the page count, but it's also down to the fact that the RGNT uses Bible paper.

Whether or not you love this kind of paper for itself, there's no doubt it's much less bulky. The RGNT lies flat for every page, even at the beginning and end. The only part that does not lie flat is the map section at the back. This makes it much more comfortable to read. You may also prefer the Bible paper and gilded edges for aesthetic reasons. The pages are Smyth-sewn, which is a more durable way of binding than gluing, especially for books you use frequently. The binding is faux (not bonded) leather, so it's a softcover. Some people find softcovers preferable to hardcovers because they weigh less and are less clunky; others just like hardcovers. The downside of the faux leather is that the coating wears off with frequent use, so it begins to look shabby. However even with daily use over a decade, the actual fabric of my copy is still uncompromised. If it looks tatty, at least that shows it's been well read. Finally, like three of the other reader's editions, it has a ribbon marker. What I don't like is that, first, there is only one and second, it's flimsy, not grosgrain, so it will eventually wear out at the top, which will result in no bound-in marker.

One final point you need to be aware of in deciding whether the RGNT is for you: the edition I'm reviewing here is, as noted above, the third. I had an earlier edition and the problem with it was the typeface: it was very light, making it quite a strain to read. Zondervan was apparently told this by many readers but did not change the typeface between the first and second editions. The type in the third edition is fine—in fact, it's both readable and attractive—but if you find one of the earlier editions for sale used, at a low price, I'd suggest you avoid it, bargain or not: in this case, it would be false economy.

**The upshot:** I have all five available reader's editions of the GNT. The RGNT was either the first or second I bought. At first, it won me over simply because it was light and lay flat and I find the Bible paper and gilded edges aesthetically pleasing. However with use I became more and more a convert of the lack of parsing and the fuller glossing. I see some real advantages in two of the others, but if I could have only one reader's GNT, the Zondervan edition would be it. **Highly recommended** for anyone serious about learning Greek.