A Journey to Loving the Greek New Testament

It's not really about me, but about one reader's winding path to loving the Greek New Testament (GNT). Mostly, though, about you, whoever you are, Gentle Reader, and why I'd like to help you if you have a desire, small or large, to read the New Testament in Greek.

Decades ago, I found myself living in a town in the US where there was a celebrated seminary. I was at that time a language teacher in a university. I'd learnt a lot of languages in my life (five, to be precise, between the ages of 11 and 17) and I thought I'd like to learn to read NT Greek. I wasn't in a position to take a course, but I'd had all these languages in school, including Latin, and I'd been trained to teach languages: how hard could it be to teach myself Greek?

So off I went to the seminary bookstore, poked around on the shelves and found a little paperback introduction to NT Greek along with a key, a vinyl-covered United Bible Societies NT (with a dictionary at the back) and toddled home, very pleased, thinking I had everything I needed to learn to read the GNT.

Years later, when packing books for yet another house move, I decided it was time to throw out that first Greek tutor, but not without one last look. The pages were falling out, they'd been covered in annotations and I realised as I leafed through it, that I'd made much better use of this little book than I'd realised—but I'd barely touched the UBS NT. Why? Because no matter how well I'd worked through the grammar and exercises, I still couldn't actually read the New Testament in Greek (as opposed to puzzling out selected sentences), despite the fact that as a result of my secondary education, I could still read three languages other than English with ease and despite the fact that I had been a language teacher.

In between my work with the little paperback Greek tutor and my grimy moment of truth, sitting on the floor, packing yet another box, I had taken an intensive summer course in Classical Greek. You'd think that would have equipped me to read the GNT, and it did, up to a point. After that summer, I got into the habit of taking my little Nestle-Aland GNT with me to chapel and church, so I could follow the NT lessons along in the text. I kept up well enough, and could read the Gospels reasonably well, but if I tried to read passages from Acts to Revelation unaided, very often I floundered. Part of the problem was vocabulary specific to the GNT, but not all. (My Classical Greek course had taught me the words for things like hoplites and triremes, not helpful for the NT.) The real problem was that mostly the Classical Greek course taught me to parse and translate either isolated sentences culled from various ancient texts or longer segments of gnarled verse, slowly and painfully. What it didn't teach me was how to read to read longer passages of prose with any degree of fluency. Gradually, with the pressure of work, I stopped reading my GNT, no longer even bringing it with me to church.

Then I had another moment of truth (I won't accord it the significance of a Damascus road experience, but it was in its way life changing). I was sitting in a freezing stone church in England early one morning, late in December, listening to the Epistle set in the Book of Common Prayer for the fourth Sunday of Advent, which is from Philippians 4: 'Rejoice in the Lord alway, and again I say, Rejoice.' The familiar words brought back a sweet memory of the anthem Purcell set to these words, which I had sung in choir when I was in university. For some reason, the familiar words and the memory of the ebullient melody galvanised me and when I went home, I took down my battered Nestle-Aland from the shelf and resolved to start reading it again seriously. Eventually, I found means to get past the puzzle-it-out-painfully approach.

Years followed, in which my training and experience in language teaching—and sheer curiosity—provoked me to investigate teaching materials for NT Greek. I was dismayed: most of what I had been taught, and knew from my own experience, about language learning and teaching was in no

way reflected in these books. They seemed stuck in the Meccano set' model of language: here are the components (vocabulary), here are the instructions (grammar rules), put them together and hey presto! you have a structure (a text). That seems to work for Meccano sets, but it fails badly as a model for language learning: people who played with Meccano sets when they were small are able to help their kids to build things out of the components decades later, but few who learn Greek by these methods seem to be able to pick up a copy of the NT and read it with relative ease once they are out of class.

The problem, I realised, was that the textbooks kept students on a starvation diet of input: learners read or translate isolated sentences, rarely seeing chunks of text at a time, or getting the gratification of actually reading the GNTs they were required to buy for class. They are deprived of the very thing they seek to learn.

Over the years, I did find a few books which took a different approach (see Recommended Reading) but my dismay at most of the available textbooks turned into determination to try to help bridge the gap myself: hence this blog.

That's my story: I had to learn a lot of languages as a kid, was trained to teach languages, learnt Greek and was dismayed by what is available to others who have a hunger to read the NT in Greek. My experience as a language learner and teacher told me Greek didn't have to be this difficult, so I resolved to see if I could help.

All I'm trying to do here is give you, Gentle Reader, practical help and a big encouraging wave along your way, so you can learn to read the scriptures in Greek for yourself. First-century fishermen who weren't native speakers of Greek were able to write it, so there's no reason it should be beyond you to learn to read what they wrote.

Post Scriptum: I discovered Meccano has gone out of business. What a pity: many kids learnt the joy making things from their sets. Meccano set textbooks for teaching Greek are still going strong, however: new versions of the same tired, ineffective strategies are published every year. That's a pity, too: how many people taught by this method still read the GNT? How many came to be persuaded they could never actually read the GNT by the very textbooks designed to teach them just that? Leave the Meccano model to building models. There are better approaches to learning a language.