

Bible Gateway †

5 Steps to Understanding Biblical Greek



WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

- How to recognize Greek letters.
- How to compare translations and use the NIV Reverse Interlinear to review the original Greek words.
- Become familiar with common Greek words and their many layers of meaning.
- Understand the choices translators have to make when making the Bible readable in modern English.

NO QUIZZES!

NO MEMORIZATION!

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STEP ONE: The Greek Alphabet

Did you know that the word “alphabet” comes from the names of the first two Greek letters, Αα (alpha) and Ββ (beta)?

In this step, we’ll take a quick look at the Greek alphabet, to help you read words of the New Testament in its original language.

Don’t worry, you don’t have to memorize them—the Reverse Interlinear we’ll be using on Bible Gateway Plus uses transliterated words, which means Greek words are written out with English letters to make them easier for you to read.

GREEK LETTER	NAME	PRONUNCIATION (TRADITIONAL)	PRONUNCIATION (MODERN)
Αα	άλφα (alpha)	a	a
Ββ	βήτα (beta)	b	v
Γγ	γάμμα (gamma)	g/ng (“ng” when doubled γγ and in a few other cases)	g/y/ng (hard “g” before α, ο, ω, and most consonants; soft “y” before other vowels)
Δδ	δέλτα (delta)	d	th (as in “the”)
Εε	έψιλον (epsilon)	e	ay
Ζζ	ζήτα (zeta)	z	z
Ηη	ήτα (eta)	e	i
Θθ	θήτα (theta)	th	th (as in “think”)
Ιι	ιώτα (iota)	i	i
Κκ	κάππα (kappa)	k	k
Λλ	λάμβδα (lambda)	l	l
Μμ	μυ (mu)	m	m
Νν	νυ (nu)	n	n
Ξξ	ξι (xi)	x	x
Οο	όμικρον (omikron)	o	o
Ππ	πι (pi)	p	p
Ρρ	ρο (rho)	r	r
Σσ (ς at end of word)	σίγμα (sigma)	s	s
Ττ	ταυ (tau)	t	t
Υυ	ύψιλον (upsilon)	u	i
Φφ	φι (phi)	f	f
Χχ	χι (chi)	c	ch (as in “ache”)
Ψψ	ψι (psi)	ps	ps
Ωω	ωμέγα (omega)	o	o

STEP ONE: The Greek Alphabet *(continued)*

Greek Pronunciation

One thing to note when reading Greek words out loud is that there are two pronunciation systems you can use. Since nobody knows exactly how Ancient Greek was pronounced, we have to make our best guess.

The **traditional format** used in the west was more or less invented by the Dutch Renaissance theologian and translator Desiderius Erasmus. Today, it is becoming increasingly popular for students of Ancient Greek to use **Modern Greek pronunciations**, which might prove more helpful if you ever want to travel to Greece. (The most important difference to note is for the letter “υ,” pronounced “oo” traditionally, and “ee” in modern Greek.)

Much more helpfully, Greek has a baked-in accent system that tells you exactly which syllables to stress when you’re reading it, so you don’t have to guess.

One last thing to note: words that start with vowels have an additional accent mark that indicates “smooth breathing” (᾿) or “rough breathing” (῀). Don’t worry about that right now.

Here are a few common Greek words, plus transliterations and translations.

- λόγος (logos) - word
- θεός (theos) - God/god
- ἀρχή (arche) - beginning

Getting the hang of it?

In Step Two, we’ll look at these words in the context of a famous verse of the Bible.

STEP TWO: Read a Bible Verse in Greek

Are you ready to read some Greek?

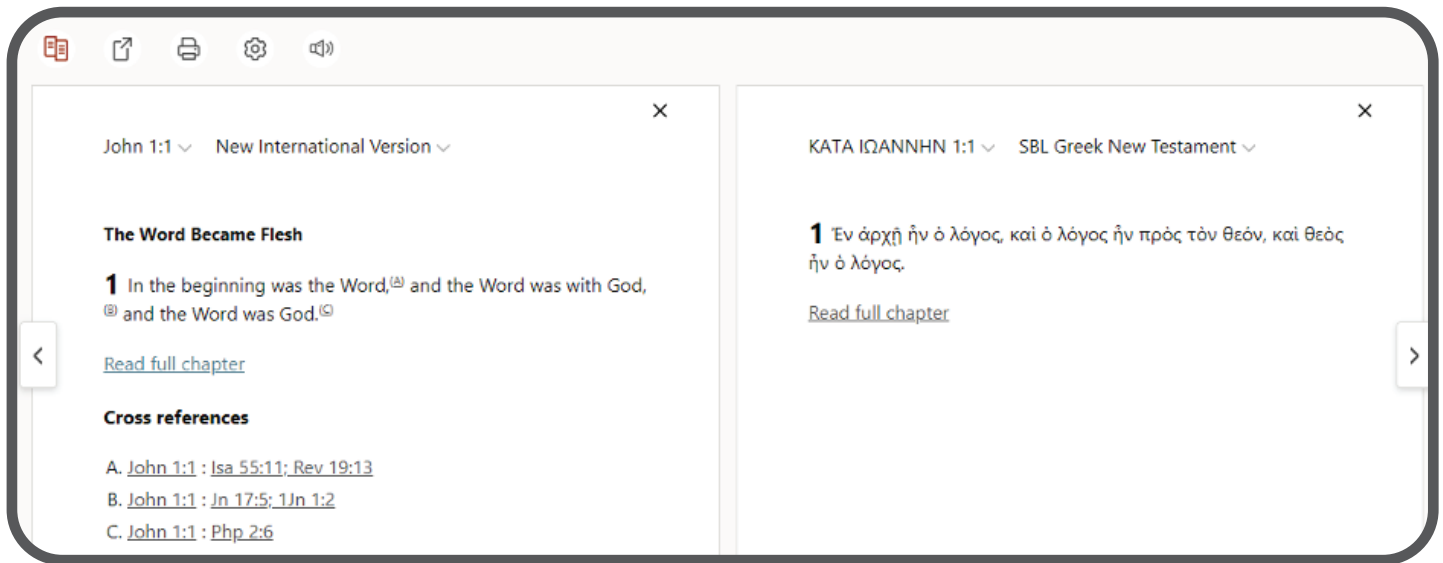
Let's start with John 1:1 (a common first text for students of Biblical Greek). Here you go:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

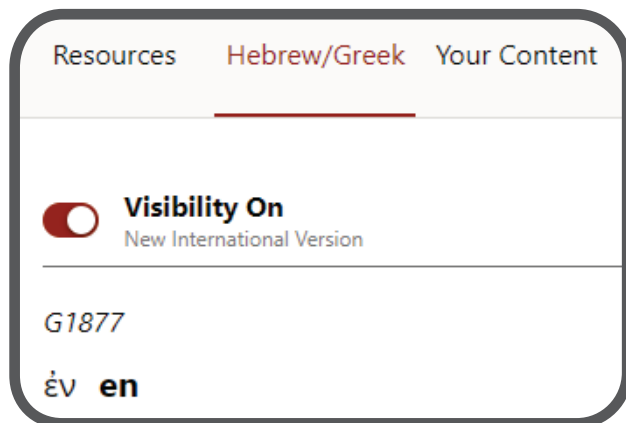
Did your eyes just glaze over a little bit? Not to worry—we're going to help you sort through it.

Opening Greek Bibles in Bible Gateway

If you want to read the Greek Bible in Bible Gateway, here is what we recommend:



1. First open a parallel passage with your favorite New Testament version and the SBL Greek New Testament. (We'll use NIV because of #2, below.)



2. Next use the Hebrew/Greek Reverse Interlinear, which inserts a line underneath the NIV Bible reading with the original Greek word. Note that this method provides the *transliterated* word, rather than the actual Greek (for example, *logos* instead of **λόγος**). But if you click on the word, you'll see the Greek letters in the box to the right.

To turn on the Reverse Interlinear, first open the passage you want to read. Then, on the right, click "Hebrew/Greek" (next to "Resources").

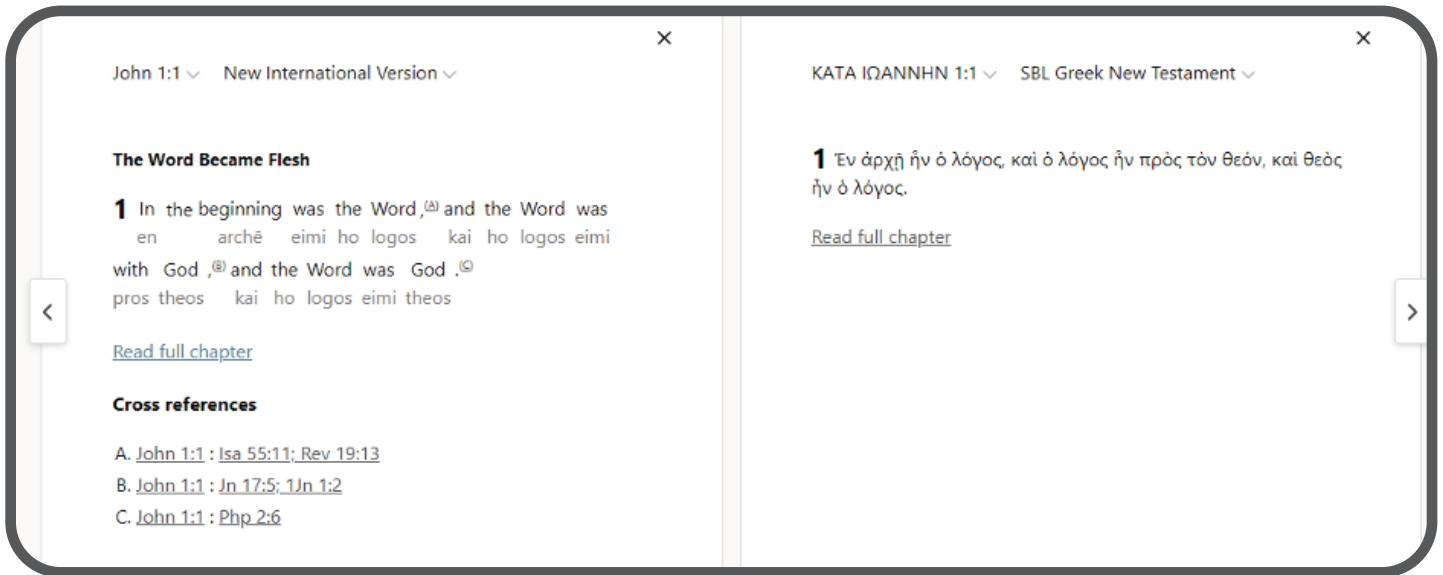
The first time you do this, you'll see an informational image. Click "Continue," then click the slider from "Visibility Off" to "Visibility On."

Now you're ready to go. Feel free to play around with that a little bit. In Step Three, we'll zero in on the main words in John 1:1 using the tools above, to get a better sense of how they map onto English (or don't).

STEP THREE: Translating Greek to English

Χαῖρε (greetings)! In this step we're going to make sense of John 1:1 in Greek.

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.



Read John 1:1 in Greek

Let's work backward using the Reverse Interlinear method and the NIV translation. (You can use whichever translation you prefer—this particular verse tends to be pretty similar across most versions.)

You may want to open up the Reverse Interlinear in a separate tab—or you can just follow along below.

In	the	beginning	was	the	Word,	and	the	Word
En	—	arche	en	ho	logos	kai	ho	logos
Ἐν	—	ἀρχῇ	ἦν	ὁ	λόγος	καὶ	ὁ	λόγος

was	with	God,	and	the	Word	was	God.
en	pros	ton theon	and	ho	logos	en	theos.
ἦν	πρὸς	τὸν θεόν	καὶ	ὁ	λόγος	ἦν	θεὸς.

STEP THREE: Translating Greek to English *(continued)*

A couple of things to note:

- Greek applies articles like “the” inconsistently. Here we see “beginning” instead of “the beginning.” And the word **θεός** appears once with the article (“the God”) and once without.
- Greek tends to change the end (and sometimes beginning) of words much more often than English does. (For linguistics nerds: Greek is an *inflected* language.) Here, **θεός** and **θεόν** are the same word in different cases. We see this in English mostly with pronouns—I/me, him/his—but Greek does it for every noun!

Let’s Translate!

Just for fun, based on what you can see above, let’s do our own *very literal* translation of John 1:1.

“In beginning was the Word, and the Word was with the God, and God was the Word.”

For that last clause (“God was the Word”), it’s important to understand that Greek has a much more flexible sentence structure than English. So that phrase could mean equally “God was the Word” or “the Word was God.” It’s up to the translator to pick the best option!

In Step Four, we’ll take a deeper dive into *other* choices translators have to make on this passage—such as choosing from the many meanings Greek words can have.

STEP FOUR: How to Do a Greek Word Study

In this step, we'll do a Greek word study of the passage we've been reading.

To do this, let's look at some specific Greek words in John 1:1. Then we'll explore some of the choices translators have to make to turn them into English.

You can access this information through the Reverse Interlinear Bible in Bible Gateway Plus—but we'll reproduce it here for ease of access.

In	the	beginning	was	the	Word,	and	the	Word
En	—	arche	en	ho	logos	kai	ho	logos
Ἐν	—	ἀρχῆ	ἦν	ὁ	λόγος	καὶ	ὁ	λόγος

was	with	God,	and	the	Word	was	God.
en	pros	ton theon	and	ho	logos	en	theos.
ἦν	πρὸς	τὸν θεόν	καὶ	ὁ	λόγος	ἦν	θεός.

Nouns of Nuance

There are three nouns in this verse: **ἀρχῆ (arche)**, **λόγος (logos)**, and **θεός (theos)**. Click on each one in the Reverse Interlinear Bible to see its layers of meaning.

G2536

θεός **theos**

, n. [1315] [→ [117](#), [2516](#), [2521](#), [2522](#), [2531](#), [2532](#), [2533](#), [2534](#), [2535](#), [2537](#), [2538](#), [2539](#), [2540](#), [2541](#), [2554](#), [5510](#), [5806](#); cf. [2520](#)]. God, usually refers to the one true God; in a very few contexts it refers to a (pagan) god or goddess. The "Son of God" as a title of Jesus emphasizes his unique relationship to the Father. "The god of this age" refers to the devil:— God (1149), God's (132), gods (8), his^S (5), him^S (4), God-fearing (2 [[+5828](#), [3836](#)]), godly (2), he^S (2 [[+3836](#)]), God-fearing gentiles (1 [[+5828](#), [3836](#)]), divine (1), goddess (1), godly (1 [[+2848](#)]), godly (1 [[+2848](#)]), he^S (1 [[+3836](#)]), in God's name (1 [[+3991](#), [3836](#)]), no ordinary (1 [[+842](#), [3836](#)]), this^S (1), NDT (2)

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Θεός in this instance is pretty straightforward. In a few instances it can mean pagan gods or goddesses—and in 2 Corinthians 4:4 it might even refer to the devil. But in this particular verse, there's little ambiguity.

STEP FOUR: How to Do a Greek Word Study *(continued)*

G794

ἀρχή **archē**

, n. [55] [*v* 806]. beginning, origin, first; ruler, power, authority; position of authority, domain:– beginning (32), rulers (5), first (3), corners (2), power (2), demons (1), dominion (1), early days (1), elementary (1), elementary truths (1 [+5122, 3836]), it^s (1 [+4005, 608, 201]), original (1), positions of authority (1), powers (1), rule (1), ruler (1)

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Ἀρχῆ is a little more interesting. As you can see, “beginning” is only one of its possible meanings. It can also mean “power,” “authority,” and other similar terms. In other words, ἀρχῆ doesn’t just mean *beginning* (or first in time), it also means first in *order*, or first in a hierarchy. Early readers (or, more likely, hearers, since most people at the time were illiterate and these books were largely intended to be read aloud in service) of this passage would have instantly understood the multiple meanings of the term—but for us English readers, today, we typically only get one: “beginning.” We can mostly glean the rest from the remainder of the verse—but still, there is a bit of simplification needed to fit “ἀρχῆ” into modern English.

A Word on the Word “Word”

Λόγος goes further still. Take a look at all the different meanings **λόγος** can have in English.

G3364

λόγος **logos**

, n. [330] [*v* 3306]. word, spoken or written, often with a focus on the content of a communication (note the many contextual translations in NIV); matter, thing. “The Word” is a title of Christ (Jn 1:1), emphasizing his own deity and communication of who God is and what he is like:– word (121), words (53), message (30), saying (10), teaching (8), account (7), speech (6), news (4), question (4), what^s (4 [+3836]), command (3), said (3), say (3), this^s (3 [+3836]), word of mouth (3), accounts (2), instruction (2), matter (2), preaching (2), speaker (2), talk (2), talking (2), thing (2),

Word, matter, thing.
 Message, saying, teaching.
 News, question, command.
 The list goes on. (Traditionally, it can also mean something like “reason” or “the reasoning faculty of the mind.”)

Now imagine you’ve never read the Bible in English. You’ve never seen Jesus (or the Bible) referred to as God’s Word. You’re looking at this passage as a Greek speaker, who automatically knows all the different meanings of **λόγος**, and you want to convert it into simple, readable English.

What word do you choose?

John Wycliffe chose “word,” and so did King James’ translators—and the rest is history. It’s a good word. But it’s not the only one. And knowing all the other options helps you to understand the deep nuances of just what John—from God—is saying about who and what Jesus is.

Now that we’ve explored **John 1:1** from various angles, tomorrow we will take what we’ve learned and apply it to a different verse: **1 Corinthians 15:24**.

STEP FIVE: Applying What You’ve Learned

Quiz time! See if you can recognize any words below, in **1 Corinthians 15:24**.

(Hint: remember the changing cases from Step Three’s lesson.)

εἶτα τὸ τέλος, ὅταν παραδιδῶ τὴν βασιλείαν τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρί, ὅταν καταργήσῃ
πᾶσαν ἀρχὴν καὶ πᾶσαν ἐξουσίαν καὶ δύναμιν,

OK, that was unfair—we promised no quizzes. This is also a much more complicated verse than **John 1:1**.

And that’s the point! One of the things you get to see when looking at the Greek is the very different styles different writers use. Paul here is notorious for his long, winding sentences, which most translators break into shorter ones in English for easier reading.

Let’s take a closer look:

Then	the	end	will come,	when	he hands over	the	kingdom	to God
eita	to	telos		otan	paradido	ten	basileian	to theo
εἶτα	τὸ	τέλος,		ὅταν	παραδιδῶ	τὴν	βασιλείαν	τῷ θεῷ

	the Father	after	he has destroyed	all	dominion,	
kai	patri	otan	katargese	pasan	archen	kai pasan
καὶ	πατρί,	ὅταν	καταργήσῃ	πᾶσαν	ἀρχὴν	καὶ πᾶσαν

authority	and	power.
exousian	kai	dynamin,
ἐξουσίαν	καὶ	δύναμιν,

There’s a lot to unpack here. Let’s dig in.

STEP FIVE: Applying What You've Learned *(continued)*

Grammatical Adjustments

First, you can see how many liberties the translators took with Paul's grammar. In the Greek, this is the middle of a sentence that stretches from 1 Corinthians 15:23-25. In the English, it's been made into its own single sentence.

In addition, the translators have smoothed out the structure in several places. They've provided "will come" where the Greek just says "then the end." They've also adjusted "to the God and Father" to "to God the Father," and "all dominion and all authority and power" to just "all dominion, authority and power."

Word Study

With your Reverse Interlinear open, take a look at some of Paul's word choices here.

G5465

τέλος **telos**

, n. [40] [→ [269](#), [699](#), [1412](#), [1754](#), [2200](#), [3387](#), [3911](#), [4117](#), [4500](#), [5333](#), [5334](#), [5455](#), [5456](#), [5457](#), [5458](#), [5459](#), [5460](#), [5461](#), [5464](#); cf. [5462](#), [5467](#)]. end, result, outcome, finish, goal; revenue, tax, duty;— end (21), culmination (2), outcome (2), revenue (2), destiny (1), duty (1), end result (1), eventually (1 [+[1650](#)]), finally (1 [+[3836](#)]), finally brought about (1), fulfillment (1), fully (1 [+[2401](#)]), goal (1), last (1), result (1), result in (1), very end (1)

- **Τέλος** is a great word that doesn't just mean "end" but implies the fulfillment of purpose. Other options include "culmination," "destiny," or perhaps "completion."
- **Παραδιδῶ** is the same word used in the Gospels when Judas "betrays" (or, more literally, "hands over") Jesus. The Greek word doesn't have quite the same emotional force as the English "betrayal."
- "Destroy" is a somewhat violent rendering of "**καταργήση**." It's not wrong, of course, but more often the word has a sense of "nullify, make ineffective, or cause to pass away."
- Remember our discussion of **ἀρχῆ** in Step Four? Here, **ἀρχὴν** (same word, different case) is understood more in the sense of "rule, authority" or (as they put it) "dominion."

Let's Get Literal—Or Not

Just as we did with John 1:1 in Step Three, let's put together our own very literal translation of 1 Corinthians 15:24.

"... then the completion, when he hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when he has nullified all rule and all authority and power, ..."

What do you think of that?

STEP FIVE: Applying What You've Learned *(continued)*

It's easy to see why the NIV translators made some of their choices—Paul's style can be a bit confusing. (Many scholars believe this is partly because he mostly dictated his letters to a scribe, who wrote down the words as Paul was speaking.)

On the other hand, we do lose some of the shades of meaning in making such passages more accessible. Greek word studies help show just how vibrant, alive, and mysterious God's Word (or λόγος) is—and always has been.

Another way to explore this—either instead of or in addition to the Greek—is by comparing several translations side by side (or in *parallel*), and seeing the different ways translators have chosen to render the same Greek passage. Bible Gateway lets you parallel up to five versions. Try choosing some that are very different from each other—or instance, the NIV, KJV (or NKJV), NASB, and NLT—to see just how varied they can be.

Congratulations, you have now learned how to access Biblical Greek with Bible Gateway Plus!

We hope we have helped you learn how to recognize Greek letters, and to understand how tools like the NIV Reverse Interlinear and Bibles in parallel highlight the layers of meaning in the original Greek. And, maybe more importantly, the types of choices translators have to make when making the Bible readable in modern English.

Use these steps to study any verse in the New Testament, and you'll be on your way to a better understanding of the Bible.