Our best sources of knowledge of the living Greek language of Roman Egypt are the nonliterary papyri (and ostraca), which include personal and business letters, receipts, orders, contracts, petitions, wills, census returns, registrations, and other documents. They reflect in varying degrees the Greek Koine used as a *lingua franca* throughout the Mediterranean world. This language shows developments in phonology, morphology, and syntax that are found also in biblical Greek. Since the language of Roman Egypt was spoken and written within a largely bilingual community, it also serves to shed light on an analogous situation in first-century Palestine.

1. **Phonology**

Orthographic variations in the papyri enable us to determine the phonemic structure of the language in use and the relative phonetic values of its sounds. The pronunciation of Greek reflected in these documents from Egypt during the Roman period represents a transitional stage between the sound systems of the Greek dialects of Classical times and those of Modern Greek. But there is also abundant evidence that the Greek of Roman Egypt was subject to widespread bilingual interference from the native language of Egyptian speakers and writers. Effects of this are reflected in New Testament manuscripts.

In the vowel system, both the Classically long and short diphthongs have been reduced to simple vowels or (in the case of αυ, ευ, and ηυ) to a vowel

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+ consonantal element. Itacism is well advanced, with the result that the phoneme /i/ is represented interchangeably in writing by ι, ει, and often η.2 /e/ is represented by both ε and αι (and often η).3 /o/ is represented equally by ο and ω,4 /u/ by ωυ,5 and /y/ by υ, ui, and αι.6 All quantitative distinction has been lost. This is indicated by the frequent interchanges of etymologically long and short vowels and diphthongs.7 Pitch accent has been replaced by a stress accent, reflecting the transfer by non-native Greek speakers of their own accessional patterns to their Greek. Consequently, vowels in unaccented syllables tend toward schwa /a/, reflected in the frequent confusion of α, ε, and ο in unaccented syllables.8

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der magnetischen Inschriften (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1904); Edmund Rüsch, Grammatik der delphischen Inschriften; 1: Lautelehre (Berlin: Weidmann, 1914); Guilelmus Crönert, Memory Graeca Herculaneensis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903).

2 E.g. ι (for ι) SB 7376.27 (AD 3); τειμήν (for τιμήν) P.Lond. 262 = M.Chr. 181.5 (AD 11); εινα (for ινα) P.Mich. 466.13 (AD 107); ηδίν (for ηδίν) BGU 830.6 (1st c.); ημί (for ημί) P.Oxy. 1481.3 (early 2nd c.); ειμί (for ημί) PSI 917.4 (1st c.); πασι βεβαίωσε (for πάση βεβαίωσε) P.Mich. 280.6 (1st c.). This interchange is found in various areas of the Mediterranean world from the 3rd c. BC on (Mayser, Grammar, 1:160–65; Meisterhans-Schwyzer, Grammatik, 48–49; Schweizer, Grammatik, 52–53; Nachmanson, Laute, 34–36; Rüsch, Grammatik, 65–75, 80–100; Crönert, Memoria, 26–34).

3 E.g. κε (for και) P.Tebt. 408.5 (AD 3); εδέου (for ἔδεου) κοτύλας Εξ P.Mich. 322a.32 (AD 46); πένται (for πέντε) P.Mich. 309 introd. 2 (1st c.); αχώ (for εχώ) P.Land. 117.3 (3rd c.); μέ (for µέ) P.IFAO 2:28.6 (1st c.); ήν (for ἤν) BGU 1097.3,16 (AD 41–69). This interchange is found elsewhere in the Koine but later than in Egypt: at Delphi from the late first c. BC on (Rüsch, Grammatik, 76–80); at Magnesia from AD 50 on (Nachmanson, Laute, 37); at Athens from AD 100 on (Meisterhans-Schwyzer, Grammatik, 34); at Pergumum late and rarely (Schweizer, Grammatik, 77–78). In the Ptolemaic papyri, these symbols interchange sporadically already in the fourth c. BC but still only rarely in the first c. BC (Mayser, Grammar, 1:15–86).

4 E.g. ξις (for ξω) P.Mich. 230.7 (AD 48); ημόν (for ημών) P.Mich. 282.1 (1st c.); ἀπό (for από) SB 8950 = PSI 1320.18 (AD 82–96); υ (for ο) BGU 1653,18 (AD 84). See further Mayser, Grammar, 1:73–76; Gignac, Grammar, 1:275–277.

5 The inherited diphthong /ou/ had been reduced to a long /o/ by the seventh c. BC in Corinthian and by the fifth c. BC in Attic-Ionic, when the spurious diphthong υω was adopted to represent the long closed /o/ arising from contraction or compensative lengthening. It had shifted to /u/ by fourth-c. BC Boeotian. See Edward Schwyzzer, Griechische Grammatik (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft; 3 vols.; Munich: Beck, 1950–1953), 1:191–194; Michel Lejeune, Phonétique historique du mycéénien et du grec ancien (Tradition de l’Humanisme 9; Paris: Klincksieck, 1972), § 241.

6 E.g. λυπάν (for λοιπάν) P.Oxy. 1480.13 (AD 32); ο (for ο) CPR 198.15 (AD 139); συνούσις (for συνούσις) P.Mich. 339.1 (AD 46); εἰμί (for ημί) P.Grenf. 1:48 = W.Chr. 416.9 (AD 191); etc. See Mayser, Grammar, 1:187–91; Gignac, Grammar, 1397–199.

7 See further Schwyzzer, Griechische Grammatik, 1:371–395; Mayser, Grammatik, 1:1137–119; Gignac, Grammar, 1324.

8 E.g. πάντε (for πάντε) O.Theb. 126.3–4 (early 1st c.); ματά (for μετά) BGU 1093.6 (3rd c.); τέσσαρος (for τέσσαρας) P.Princ. 142.6 (ca. AD 23); ἐβταμηκόντα (for ἐβδο-) WO 392.2 (AD 44);