

Chapter Three

The Purpose of Tongues In Acts 2

The purpose of tongues in Acts 2 may be collectively discussed under two main heads: (1) To mark the giving of the Ruach as promised by Jochanan the Baptizer and Messiah for the realization of Messiah's world-wide evangelistic commission, and (2) to mark the beginning of the "times of the Gentiles" and thus of God's judgment against the nation of Israel according to the prophets of the Tanakh and the words of Messiah in Matthew 21:43. The Ruach was given, then, to bring to fruition the "New Covenant" promised by Jeremiah. The flow of the narrative in Acts makes it clearly Luke's purpose to show the Shavuot following Yeshua's resurrection as the realization of Messiah's promise that the Ruach would come to aid in the fulfillment of His commands. One is struck with this from the outset of the narrative. The disciples were (1) to wait before going to evangelize the nations, (2) to wait specifically in Jerusalem and (3) wait *until* the Spirit was given to them in such a way as they would be empowered to accomplish the task given to them by their Master (Acts 1:3-8). The fact that they were devoting themselves to prayer (1:14) would likewise indicate their anticipation of this promised event. The only thing coming between the promise, command, and ascension of Yeshua and the coming of the Ruach is the choosing of Matthias to replace Judas. Luke certainly intends the reader to gather the significance of the Shavuot event in light of Yeshua's command to evangelize the nations.

The feast of Shavuot would likewise point to this purpose.³⁹ God is not capricious. Tongues must have a significant story to tell us as to the purpose of the Ruach's coming in this way. The most obvious interpretation fits well with Yeshua's command upon the disciples to evangelize the world (Matt. 28:19, 20; Ac. 1:8). That He enabled them to speak in different languages was enormously symbolic of the realized New Covenant which would bring to fruition the promise made to the fathers that "in your seed all the nations of earth will be blessed."⁴⁰ And Shavuot, celebrating the harvest, is likewise replete with symbolism as the followers of Yeshua are now endowed to reap the harvest of mankind for God's glory.

The central theme of Peter's message would likewise emphasize this purpose. His quoting of the prophet Joel confirms the following: (1) God would give His Ruach to all mankind in the end times, no longer reserving His work only for Israel, (2) this giving of the Ruach would be marked by the prophetic, revelational activity of the Ruach and (3) all who would call upon God would receive His salvation, regardless of race or nationality. Peter clearly connects the prophecy of Joel to the events of the moment (Ac. 2:16).⁴¹

³⁹See p. 10, note 22 above.

⁴⁰Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; Gal. 3:8; Ac. 3:25. The realization of this promise is the very heart of the New Covenant. See the profitable comments in Willis Beecher. *The Prophets and the Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 195ff.

⁴¹On Peter's use of Joel in Ac. 2, the author has written a monograph of a technical nature dealing with the language, syntax, etc. of both the Hebrew and Greek texts. This is available upon request at thegg@bigplanet.com.

It can be seen that his position reinforces the biblical doctrine of the promise. Indeed, Pentecost becomes the focal point for the realization of that promise for Gentiles whose entrance into the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant is assured by the earnest of the Holy Spirit.⁴²

The tongues also functioned as a sign of God's judgment against the nation of Israel and the beginning point for "the times of the Gentiles." This may not seem to be so apparent from the context of Acts 2, but an understanding of the quote from Joel 2 will show this to be the case.

The full message of Peter is certainly in the form of a judgment, since the very One they crucified is responsible for the outpouring of the Ruach Who was presently manifesting Himself (Ac. 2:22-36). Indeed, the fact that Peter went to the Joel passage should alert us to the theme of divine judgment. While the section quoted gives promise of God's blessing, the overall structure of the passage would stress that God's judgment for disobedience is certain. In Joel, the locust plague of the present (1:1-14) is used as an illustration of the coming Assyrians (1:15-2:27), who likewise are a picture of the final day of God's judgment (2:28ff). While covenant blessing is assured for all who call upon the name of the Lord, the wrath of God is revealed upon all who disregard His commands and fly in the face of His ultimate sovereignty. Peter does not feel obliged to leave out a direct reference to judgment (2:19-20) when he quotes the prophet and one wonders how this is to be interpreted in the events of Shavuot if it is not indicative of the judgment prophesied upon unbelieving Israel.

The use of Isaiah 28:11 by the Apostle Paul in 1 Co. 14 also indicates this purpose of tongues. In verse 21 Paul introduces a quote from Isaiah 28⁴³ in order to substantiate the truth that tongues, as far as being a sign, are for the unbelievers not the believers (v. 22).

The context of the Is. 28:11 is instructive. Isaiah prophesies a time when God will speak to disbelieving and wayward Israel "through stammering lips and a foreign tongue" (NASB) with the result that (v. 13) they will "stumble backward, be broken and taken captive" (NASB). The same poetic pair (stammering lips / / foreign tongue) is found in 33:19 of Isaiah. Interestingly, Paul retains the third masculine singular idea of the MT though he changes the verb to first singular. Still, in the Apostle's quote God is the spokesman, following Isaiah. Curiously, the Lxx and some of the Qumran texts (though not 1QIsa) change to the third plural, making the wicked priests and prophets the subject (as the Lxx) or the Kittim (Qumran). The NASB translation "stammering

⁴²Richard Patterson, "Joel's Day of the Lord and Pentecost," unpublished monograph in class notes, p. 14, n.d. See also Patterson, Richard. "Joel" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, (Ed., Gaebelain), 7:257-8.

⁴³Note also Deut 28:49; Jer 5:15. The quote from Isaiah 28:11 in 1Co 14 is neither strictly from the MT nor the Lxx:

δια φαυλισμον χειλεω	כי בלעלי שפה
δια γλωσσης ετερας	ובלשון אחרת
οτι λαλησουσιν τω λαω τουτω	ידבר על העם הזה
λεγοιτες αυτοις	אשר אמר אליהם
τουτο το αναπαυμα τω πεινωγτι	זאת המנוחה הבוחו לעיף
και τουτο το συντριμμα και ουκ	וזאת הברגעה ולא
ηθελησαν ακουειν	אבוא שמוע

tongue” is technically possible but the context certainly favors the more common “to mock” (1 Ki. 19:21; Ezek. 23:32). The use of “lip” שפה would render the phrase “with mocking speech,” for שפה may also mean “manner of speaking,” “speech” or simply “language” as in Genesis 11:1. The NIV has “foreign lips.” Most germane to our study, however, is the fact that the Hebrew לעג could not imply “ecstatic speech” —it is a term used often in contexts of “derision” or “mocking”⁴⁴ and is certainly the contextual meaning here. Isaiah, in his prophecy, was simply applying a previous prophecy found in Deut. 28:49, where God promises the invasion of foreigners whose language would be unknown.

Apparently Paul understood this. He uses the Isaiah passage as indicating the way in which foreign tongues may be used mockingly and as a taunt against Israel, as a sign that the covenant curses, not the blessings, are coming from the hand of God. He therefore attaches the label σημειον (sign) to the phenomenon as indicative of the fulfilling of the prophet's words. In the immediate context of Is. 28:11, the prophet has illustrated the relationship of Israel to God as that of an infant to an adult. God must likewise speak in a juvenile style to Israel who is talking with the speech of an infant. In fact, the judgment of God will come from foreigners whose language will be as indistinguishable to them as an adult's speech is to an infant.⁴⁵

Likewise, in 1 Co. 14:20, Paul admonishes the Corinthians not to think like children, but to have mature reasoning. He is following the argument of the prophet he is about to quote!⁴⁶ He understands that the fifteenth (Moses), the eighth (Isaiah) and the sixth (Jeremiah) century prophets collectively show God's continuing respect for the covenant He established with Israel. Their disobedience will bring the covenant curses.

What is more, Paul appears to follow closely the structure of the Acts 2 account, in that tongues function as a sign but do not communicate in and of themselves. They point to the prophetic curse precisely by putting the unbeliever into a state of confusion (v. 23). Unbelievers entering the assembly while all speak in tongues will think the church is mad, the exact reaction of “the unbelievers” at Shavuot. Yet, if prophecy is given, as Peter explaining the significance of the tongues at Shavuot, the communication of the truth in understandable language will bring repentance. The parallels are inescapable.

It is apparent then, that Paul's use of Is. 28:11 in his instruction on tongues verifies the fact that tongues are a sign of covenant curse against Israel specifically and against unbelievers in general, that is, against all who are not “heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29).

Simply put, when God speaks to man in a language he cannot understand, rather than being a blessing, this is a curse. In the context of 1 Co. 14 then, which finds its

⁴⁴לעג is parallel to שחק “to laugh” in the following: Jer. 20:7; Prov. 1:26; 17:5; Ps. 2:4; 59:2; Chron. 30:10. In Is. 37:22 the parallel verbaige is בזה / ראש הניעה. Note also Is. 33:19 where the context is the speech of foreigners, enemies which is unintelligible. Ps. 22:8[7] is likewise speaking of mocking. Perhaps יפטריו בשפה should be “spit with the lips” on the analogy of פטר = “Let out water” (from a canal) cf. Prov. 17:14. As in Is. 37:22, Neh. 2:19 has בזה parallel to לעג.

⁴⁵The לצו צו לצו קו לקו קו לקו of Isaiah 28:10, 13 is used by the prophet to mimick toddler “speech” or babbling. The point is obvious: if Israel continues to act as a “toddler” (spiritually speaking), she will reap the rewards of her immaturity.

⁴⁶See O. Palmer Robertson, “Tongues: Sign of Covenant Curse and Blessing,” *WTJ* 38(1975), 45.

setting in the gathered body of Messiah, tongues must be interpreted or else they signal the curse of God upon those who hear and do not understand.⁴⁷ A similar thing occurs in the parables of Messiah. They were designed to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah (Is. 6:9) in judgment against unbelieving Israel (cf. Matt. 13:14-15).

In summary we may thus state the following: (1) tongues in Acts 2 were in fact known languages. Anything other than known languages does not fit either the vocabulary used nor the intended purpose; (2) this purpose is two-fold: (a) to mark the establishment of the New Covenant and the fulfillment of the promise that "all nations would be blessed." Thus the multiple tongues gave notice that the gospel would now go world wide and (b) to mark the beginning of the era known as "the times of the gentiles" and the putting of unbelieving, national Israel under the judging hand of God. He was speaking again, but not to them; He was revealing His Word, but not in their language.

⁴⁷The following have significant statements on this line of interpretation: William Orr, James Walther. *1 Corinthians* in the *Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1979), 309; Charles Endicott. *1 Corinthians* (Minn.: James Family, reprint of 1887), 273; Charles Hodge. *Comm. on 1 Cor.* (GrandRapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1972), 293-6; Robertson & Plummer. *1 Cor.* in the *ICC* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 316-17; Sweet, J.D.M., "A Sign for Unbelievers: Paul's Attitude to Glossolalia," *NTS*, 13(April, 1967), 240-57.