

PERPLEXED BY TONGUES?

by Larry Christenson

The first time that believers in Jesus spoke in tongues, people standing by were perplexed, personally at a loss to grasp the significance of this strange speaking.¹ “What does this mean?” they asked each other. On the Festival of Pentecost, twenty-one centuries later, speaking in tongues still leaves many people perplexed.

Speaking in tongues is mentioned in the Bible in connection with the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4). It is listed in the New Testament as one of the spiritual gifts God gave the church (1 Corinthians 12:10). Why did God give this gift to the church?

The apostle Paul named the chief feature of speaking in tongues in a single suggestive phrase: “One who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God.” Speaking in tongues is a particular way to pray and worship God.

Speaking in tongues has been a part of my prayer life for more than fifty years. My purpose in writing this article is to commend the gift to fellow believers by sharing something that happened in my life three years after I first experienced speaking in tongues. It illustrates the objective reality, the nature, and the value of the gift.

In 1964 I was pastor of a congregation of the American Lutheran Church in San Pedro, California. A number of our members had received the gift of tongues. The national church (ALC) sent a research team of three men — a psychiatrist, a clinical psychologist, and a New Testament theologian — to investigate and evaluate what was happening in our congregation. During their stay, they asked for a recording of someone speaking in tongues. I turned on a tape recorder during my morning prayers and gave them the tape before they left.

Eleven years later, In 1975, I one day received a telephone call from Risto Santala, who introduced himself as a longtime Finnish missionary to Israel. He was at the time a visiting lecturer at Concordia Lutheran Seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. He said that a guest speaker at the seminary, a psychiatrist, Dr. Paul Qualben, reported on research he and two other men had done on *glossolalia* — speaking in tongues. During his talk Qualben played several prerecorded examples of tongue speaking, among them a beautiful liturgical chant. Santala was astonished and asked to get a copy of this particular tape. After a couple of days he heard it again, together

1 διηποροῦντο, imperfect, middle voice

with his wife. “We understood straight away the meaning,” he later wrote. “After having heard the chant several times, every single word became familiar. This was clear evidence of tongue speaking in a known language, beyond any doubt.”

The tape, they learned, was the one I gave to Qualben during his visit to our congregation in San Pedro, California eleven years earlier. On the phone Santala told me that he and his wife recognized the speaking in tongues as a mixture of old Hebrew with Aramaic addenda.”

My first response to Santala’s telephone call was somewhat skeptical. Reports of people speaking a known language in tongues turn up in books and testimonies occasionally. Usually the occurrence is simply mentioned, without accompanying elaboration or corroboration. I once spoke briefly in tongues in a small gathering. Afterward two pastors came up and said they thought I had spoken in Aramaic. When I questioned further, it turned out they had heard one or two sounds that sounded familiar, nothing more, and their knowledge of Aramaic was cursory. Of course alleged examples from anti-Pentecostals also turn up: someone who spoke in tongues was cursing the Lord in Chinese! Likewise, no corroboration.

I thought the tape of my morning prayers might have gotten mixed up with something else. I asked Santala to send me a copy of the tape so I could hear it. When it arrived I immediately recognized my own voice on the tape — a recording of my morning prayer time. During the course of the prayer time I spoke seven separate utterances in tongues. The third utterance in tongues was a spontaneous chant-like locution, which I sometimes do. During some intercessions in English, I mentioned my wife *Nordis* by name. The tape was unquestionably my own.

Two weeks after hearing Dr. Qualben’s talk at Concordia Lutheran Seminary, Santala wrote Qualben a letter, which he also expanded on in subsequent writing. He mailed me a copy of his letter to Qualben: “Two weeks ago you had a lecture at Concordia Lutheran Seminary about the phenomenon of *glossolalia*. You dealt with the topic reverently and scientifically. I was impressed by your unbiased attitude. You played a tape where a man sang a liturgical chant in tongues. In your lecture you said that linguists have analyzed many tapes of persons speaking in tongues and have not found that any of them represent a known language or dialect. The aforesaid chant on the tape you played, however, shows all the signs of well spoken old Hebrew with Aramaic addenda. Since I have been preaching and teaching more than ten years in modern Hebrew in Jerusalem, and since I have been used to medieval RASHI-Hebrew and Talmudic texts, I felt that it would be good to notify you of the treasure which you have in your hands.

“The song on the tape is probably in the Hypodorian mode, with A as the reciting tone,

similar to Gregorian Chant though its roots are pre-Gregorian monophonic plainsong. This type of singing traces back to early Christian hymns and the ancient Temple service. The song has all the signs of professional musical work. The whole song is well balanced beginning with *clivis* and then with *virga subtripunctum* followed by three beautiful phrases of *podatus* coming back to *virga subtripunctum* and closing with a peaceful *podatus*.

“The text is interesting and based mainly on Numbers 6:24, *The LORD bless thee*. The holy name of God, which is never pronounced by a religious Jew, is however departed to two synonyms of God, El and Jah, theologically a very interesting solution. The word *to bless* is repeated six times and always in strictly correct grammatical forms (*jevarechech*, *jevarecheck*, *va-verach*, *ve-jevarech*, *va-avarech* and *avarech*). The Hebrew equivalent in Numbers sounds *jevarechechaa* but as the object in this blessing is the **bride** — in Aramaic *kaleea* and in Hebrew *kalaa* — even the object is here in feminine form. This is already a master-work. The word *Jah* repeats six times, the Aramaic word *kaleea* (bride) is in our song four times, the word *shomeea* (to hear) twice, *hosheea* (to save) twice, *iish* (the man) twice, etc.

“The sentences are long and built with grammar. The pronunciation is of highest professional quality and has no American features whatsoever. I have been studying about eight years with a well known Jewish professor who also taught some Jewish cantors. I must admit that this man glides over the words very distinctly and smoothly. The song is divided into almost equal sections having typical Hebrew rhymes. Toward the end of the chant an **A**-sound is twice added to words where it is not necessary because of the rhyme — but this is sometimes typical in Hebrew poetry.”

I had never heard of anything called a *Hypodorian A-reciting tone*, similar to Gregorian Chant though its roots are pre-Gregorian monophonic plainsong. The terms *clivis*, *virga subtripunctum*, and *podatus* were totally meaningless to me. I know nothing of the Aramaic language. My study of Hebrew in seminary netted me my lowest grade, a **D**, and notably lowered my class standing.

When I read this initial report from Santala, I suspected we had stumbled on something significant. The tape was undeniably a recording of my own prayers one morning in September 1964. No part of the *glossolalia* that Santala heard on the tape could be accounted for on the basis of my natural background or understanding. In a later letter to me, Santala said, “I believe this tape is a church historical event” — a verifiable instance of *xenolalia* (speaking a known language in tongues).

Would other knowledgeable people agree with his findings? The only person I personally

knew who had considerable expertise in Hebrew, was Dr. Halvor Ronning, a longtime resident and doctoral candidate in Israel. I sent him a copy of the tape.

Some weeks later I received a postcard from him that read: “After carrying the tape around with me many days, and in fact meeting the author of the article (who recently returned to Israel), I sat down several hours with a Hebrew expert to copy down the tape phonetically in writing.

“Though we can hear some Hebrew words here and there, our preliminary judgment is that the author of the article went far beyond what we could detect — whether by expertise, or the gift of interpretation, or imagination, we don’t know.”

Two months later I received a hand written follow-up letter from Dr. Ronning. He wrote, “With joy and much less reserve I can write now about the prayer tape you sent me.

“At first I could only hear a few Hebrew words here and there, so I supposed that my good friend Rev. Risto Santala (a Finnish Lutheran pastor now again returned to minister in Jerusalem after being in Finland about seven years as head of a Bible school there) had received the gift of supernatural interpretation to get from the tape the amount of content that he provided in his article.

“This suspicion was confirmed at first when I let a couple of Hebrew language scholars at the Hebrew University listen to the tape. They also caught next to nothing in one listening — though one said that the melody was very interesting (like a Kurdish Jew’s liturgical chant he thought), and referred me to a university professor who collected Jewish melodies from the various Jewish immigrants coming from all parts of the world (haven’t followed up yet).

“Then Dr. Robert Lindsay (Baptist New Testament scholar over 30 years in Israel) and I sat for hours listening over and over and transcribing syllable by syllable. (He has the tape now), and to our joy we also understood the small section of chanting which Santala had heard and interpreted. Then we started recognizing more Hebrew.

“Risto himself has just now in the last two weeks transcribed the whole first section of the 3rd utterance as well, and by struggling with a DICTIONARY (!) has figured out most of the places he did not previously understand. Wow, I’m beginning to be amazed! You see, it is not modern Hebrew nor biblical, though closer to a poetical biblical Hebrew under Aramaic influence it seems — that’s why it takes scholarship and much diligent patience to figure it out.

“Sorry about the slowness with which this is all progressing but you see that gradually Lindsay (first) and then I are entering into the joy that Risto has long had about this prayer.”

In a longer article, Santala had alluded to the same problem that Ronning described: “It is rather difficult to hear and immediately understand a fluently spoken language, especially old

rarely spoken Semitic dialects where the expressions have been preserved only in a written form. With this tape we are opening the language riddle the opposite way, from a spoken tongue to a written form. Pronunciation varies throughout the centuries. Our chant however is not too difficult in its linguistic structure.

“Our chant seems to belong to a kind of mystical bride-hymn with strong Biblical emphasis. The musical and linguistic level is high, but the theological concepts are still more meaningful. The song has some mystic features which can not be invented without penetrating to ancient Jewish thinking.”

Introducing his translation of the chant, Santala wrote: “The nature of the ‘Bride Hymn’ is mysterious. It has 440 words altogether and among them about 60 verbs in correct intelligible forms. There are some words which are not used in Hebrew in proper grammatical form, but those exceptions still follow the same strange pattern, being caused probably by an Aramaic idiomatic way of speaking. Important words are repeated throughout the chant, e.g., *Lord, to bless, bride, times, man, to save, to make, to hear, to protect. Thou art as He* [this is a technical phrase, a name-identification similar to Jesus’ *Before Abraham was, I AM* in John 8:58. In the translation, below, I have rendered this technical phrase Divine as God is Divine, and have exercised some freedom in punctuation and lining, for purposes of clarity]. The heavenly Lord *Jashua* (Jesus) is stricken by *sickness*, he is *whipped, hanged, made as if being guilty by God*, but still he is *bright and pure and raised as protected by God*. According to the Jewish tradition every prayer had to be addressed in Hebrew so that the serving angels could transmit them to God. It is estimated that this kind of prayer language would originate from the first Christian centuries.”

THIS IS A TRANSLATION of the “Bride Hymn” from the tape:²

O praise the Lord!

O Man, Divine as God is Divine, be blessed.

The sweetness of Thy honor has left,

Thus he is hearing.

Thou hast been made as (sick) bruised by God.

2 For the Hebrew text derived from the tape, see page at the end of this article.

O Lord, Divine as God is Divine, my husband;
Lord my evidence as messenger,
Your food I have prepared.

Thus he will answer you:
“I shall bless, honor to God!”

My teacher [and] Lord, Divine as God is Divine, is bruised;
The Exalted One of God Thou hast made to hear.

“And I shall bless the Bride as protected by God.”

Thou hast been put as cursed by God.
The bright one of God and the bruised one of God;
The whipped one, the pure of God,
Thou hast [been] made as if guilty by God, to man.
Thee, Divine as God is Divine, he will bless you.
He has heard you.

The Lord which is hanged has been changed to man,
Thee [I honor] as Lord, wholly Divine as God is Divine.
O Jesus, for me Thou art as him, God.
I shall bless [Thee], honor to God.

Thou hast been made as protected by God
Honor to God, and as God.
Your husband hears and I shall bless his Bride.

Thus Thou, Divine as God is Divine, will bless the Bride.
As protected by God,
Here when Thou art the foundation.
I have been answered, while Thou art the Lord,
As the bruised God of my heaven, while Thou art God.
Thou hast been made as bruised by God.

You who are praying to me, my light is here,
The Lord is present and the Bride!

O as Thou hast been saving, O so Thou art saving!
He has been sweet and will bless the Bride while he is hearing.
O man, Divine as God is Divine,
And he will bless the Bride in order to show humility,
Which is strong power, and he will bless the Bride.
O he will save him who is hearing and is sick.
O she who is hearing and she is hearing, and he will bless the Bride.
O man, who is wanting the power of God, his humiliation.

O Man, Divine as God is Divine, [Thou] will bless the Bride,
That God will humiliate you, thus he hears and blesses the Bride.
Be still, thus, and he will bless the Bride
As if in heaven in order to save,
And God reveals his full power.
Thou hath made the Exalted one as if cursed by God.

“And I shall bless the Bride.”

The light of God your Messiah becomes wonderful,
He will answer, thus he saves.

“I shall bless the Bride with strong latter rain
Here when she is hearing.”

Lift up your hearts (raise)!

Santala concluded his translation of the tape noting that, “The last word corresponds presumably with the Latin *sursum corda*, *lift up your hearts*.”

“We meet in our chant profound musical expertness, good Hebrew pronunciation, old poetical type of language with pure rhymes, a clear biblical message which follows beautifully the nature of the music — and most important of all, a clear Christian gospel of Him who

became cursed instead of us. The Messiah and the Light of God is going to bless the bride with the ‘latter rain as if in heaven.’ Our chant shows the lowliness and humiliation of Christ in such a way that I am inclined to think it is a real case of *xenolalia* given by the Holy Spirit.”

What struck me, when I read Santala’s translation of words I had spoken in tongues, was how different the ideas and imagery were from my normal prayers in English.³ It was not that the words were outlandish, or obscure in meaning, just that they were different from my usual way of speaking or praying.

God gave the gift of tongues to enhance the life of prayer and worship. Speaking in tongues gives us the unusual privilege of praying about things that go beyond the limit of our own knowledge and experience, things pertaining to the Kingdom of God, in words and speech not of our own making, but chosen by the Spirit.

As I have thought about this since, it has made me more humbly aware that the Holy Spirit, though He indwells me, is profoundly *beyond* me. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

The Holy Spirit has purpose and plans that might never occur to us. Yet, paradoxically, He wants us to participate in these plans, to bring them before the Father in prayer and worship. Speaking in tongues is a gift that extends the scope of our prayers, helps us pray more effectively when “we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Romans 8:26).⁴

Speaking in tongues is sometimes described as “the least of the gifts” in a pejorative sense, as though one could set it aside in favor of higher gifts. David du Plessis’ classic response was more to the point, “Then what better place to begin our practice of the gifts?”⁵ God does not give foolish or unnecessary gifts. On the birthday of the church the Lord fashioned a gift designed to strengthen the prayer life, a need so universal that the apostle Paul could encourage

3 Larry Christenson, *Ride the River*, p. 97-98

4 Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, p.111. Stendahl sees this well-known text in *Romans* as a reference to *glossolalia*.

5 David du Plessis was an ambassador without portfolio from classical Pentecostalism to classical Protestantism and Catholicism. He was a personal guest of Pope John 23 at Vatican II.

everyone in the congregation to practice it, “I want you all to speak in tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:5).⁶

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6 For a basic understanding of speaking in tongues, these Scriptures are important: Acts 2:1-4, 10:44-48, 19:1-7; 1 Corinthians 12:1-10, 14:1-40. The author’s book outlines theological and practical aspects of tongues: Larry Christenson, *Answering Your Questions About Speaking in Tongues* (Bethany House, Minneapolis, 1968, 2005).

חלק ראשון בדיוק כמו שהוא נשמע לאוזן:
 הו הללויה. הו איש אנתה-כה-הוא-יה בריך. גלוריה
 מתיקא הלק, פה שמע. אשית כה חולה-יה. הו יה
 שאנתה-כה-יה **מרי** יה ראיתי בשלח. ונתיך שיטתי, כה
 הוא יענת, אברך, גלוריה. **מרי** יה שאנתה-כה-יה חלאה,
 עולה יה אשית בשומע ואברך בלה בשמרא-יה. שומת
 בשמדה-יה. זכא-יה וכה-חולה-יה, משוט טהרא-יה אשית
 בשלה-יה, לאיש אנתה-כה-הוא יברך. הוא שמעתיך. יה
 פישול יעתיק איש אנתה-כה-יה, ותכלי מה שאנתה כה
 ה-יה. הו ישוע, לי כה שאנתה-כה-הוא יה. אברך, גלוריה.
 משיית בשמרא-יה, גלוריה, ופיה. מריך שומע ואברך
 בלוה. שאנתה-כה-הוא יברך בלה, שאנתה-כה-הוא יברך
 בלה כמו שמרא-יה, פה שאנתה אשיה. יענתי כה שאנתה
 ה-יה בחולה-יה משמיאתי כה שאנתה יה. אשית
 בחלה-יה. קוראי אנתה, אורי פה, שוקה יה ובלה.

החלק השני הוא בצורה של רסיטל, וימרה שדומה ללחן
 גריגוריאני קדום:

הו לאן דהושיע, הו לאן הושע! מותיק היה וברך בלה כה
 שומע. הו איש כה-אנתה כה-יה וברך בלה, לשיע מכיבא
 שאון גאה וברך בלה. הו כי בשומע ובחולה משיע. הו היא
 בשומע והיא בשומע וברך בלה. הו איש שאבא כוחו-יה
 מכיו.

הו איש אנתה-כה-הוא יברך בלה, ארי יה מכיב, כה
 שמע וברך בלה. זממי-כה ויברך בלה כמו בשמיא להושיע
 ובוחו-יה מלאה פשה-יה. עולה אשית בשמדה-יה ואברך
 בלה. אוריה משיחך פולאה, יענאה כה הושע. לקישון גאה
 אברך בלה פה בשומע, עולה!