

The Interpretation of Tongues in the Middle Ages

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Many Christians today, especially those familiar with the charismatic movement, understand “the gift of tongues” as ecstatic speech: sounds and syllables believed to be uttered by a Christian under the direction of the Holy Spirit. The meaning of these sounds and syllables, however, is completely unintelligible to both the speaker and most hearers. Comprehension of such an utterance, granted to at least one hearer, requires an additional direct intervention of the Holy Spirit. This second gift of an immediate understanding of glossolalic utterance is often referred to as “the gift of interpretation of tongues.”²

Medieval commentators on the Bible understood the gift of interpretation of tongues quite differently. This article examines how Christians in the Middle Ages interpreted the phrase, “to another is given interpretation of tongues” (1 Cor 12:10), and then brings their interpretations into dialogue with contemporary Christianity. Under consideration are eight commentaries, from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, on 1 Corinthians 12:10. These include the commentaries of well-known medieval theologians like Lanfranc of Bec (d. 1089), the Master of the *Sentences*, Peter Lombard (d. 1164), and the Angelic Doctor, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274).

In these commentaries, two lines of interpretation emerge. The first maintains that the gift of interpretation of tongues refers to an ability to translate languages like Hebrew and Greek into Latin. Such an interpretation cites St Jerome (d. 420), who translated the Scriptures from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, as an example of one who

1 An earlier version of this article, a paper titled “The Spirit’s Gift of Interpretation: Medieval Glosses on 1 Corinthians 12:10,” was delivered at the 49th Annual Convention of the College Theological Society at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 29 May – 1 June 2003.

2 Jim Scully, *The Gift of Tongues, Revised*, Pamphlet 8 (Pecos NM: Dove, 2000). For a summary of the official statements of the Catholic Church on Spirit baptism and charismatic renewal, see Ralph Del Colle, “Spirit Baptism: A Catholic Perspective,” in *Perspectives on Spirit Baptism: Five Views*, ed. Chad Owen Brand (Nashville TN: Broadman and Holman, 2004) 241-89.

possessed this charism. The second understanding identifies the gift as an ability to explain difficult passages of sacred Scripture.

THE ABILITY TO TRANSLATE

Several medieval commentators explain the gift of interpretation of tongues as an ability to translate from one language into another. Bruno the Carthusian (d. 1101), for example, defines it as the ability “to interpret what is in Greek into Latin, or vice versa.”³ Otto of Vercelli (d. 961), emphasizing its usefulness and functionality in the Church, describes the gift of interpretation of tongues in this manner: “When certain things are read or spoken, one is able helpfully to translate the language for the building up of the others.”⁴ Haymo of Auxerre (d. 875) presents the Church Father Jerome (d. 420), “who translated the divine Scriptures from Hebrew into Latin,” as a classic example of one who possessed the gift of interpretation of tongues.⁵

These medieval authors do not suggest that possession of the gift necessarily entails the ability to translate ancient or foreign languages by means of a miraculous, pentecostal experience, a supernatural gift of understanding another language without any previous study or natural process of learning. Not that these medieval Christian authors totally discount such a pentecostal phenomenon. They accept, for example, that this was indeed the means by which the apostles received the gift of tongues on the day of Pentecost. They also concede that God continues to display such miracles in special circumstances, such as in the experience of outstanding Christian missionaries; for, according to certain hagiographical sources, preaching evangelists like St Dominic Guzman (d. 1221) and St Anthony of Padua (d. 1231) received the gift of tongues in this manner.⁶ Nevertheless, by citing

3 Bruno the Carthusian, *In epistolam I ad Corinthios*, on 1 Cor 12:10 (PL 153:189): “*Alii datur interpretatio sermonum; quod Graecum scit interpretari per Latinum, vel e converso. Vel interpretatio sermonum, id est expositio allegoriarum.*”

4 Otto of Vercelli, *In epistolam I ad Corinthios*, on 1 Cor 12:10 (PL 134:382): “*Alii interpretatio sermonum; ut cum aliqua leguntur, vel dicuntur, ad profectum aliorum salubriter in alteram posit linguam transferre.*”

5 Haymo of Auxerre, *In epistolam I ad Corinthios*, on 1 Cor 12:10 (PL 117:578): “*Alii interpretatio sermonum, ut Hieronymo qui divinas Scripturas ex Hebraeo in Latinum transtulit.*”

6 E. Glenn Hinson, “A Brief History of Glossolalia,” in *Glossolalia: Tongue Speaking in Biblical, Historical, and Psychological Perspective*, ed. Frank Stagg, E. Glenn Hinson, and Wayne E. Oates (Nashville TN: Abington, 1967) 45-75, here 56; George Barton Cutten, *Speaking With Tongues: Historically and Psychologically Considered* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1926) 38-39.

Jerome as an example of a person possessing the gift of interpretation of tongues, medieval writers imply that the usual means of coming into possession of the gift is through study or time spent abroad. After all, Jerome himself had learned the Hebrew language from a Jewish scholar, and he had learned Greek and Syriac by living in the East for the last thirty years of his life.⁷ This more natural process is in keeping with the medieval understanding of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The supernatural source of the gift is affirmed, but the gift is not given or used in such a way that nature is violated in the process. For medieval believers, then, grace was construed more as divine power that heals, equips, and strengthens, rather than something that supersedes nature.

SKILL IN EXPLAINING DIFFICULT PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE

A second medieval understanding of the gift of interpretation of tongues holds that the gift consists of an ability to explain obscure passages of Scripture. Sedulius Scottus (*floruit* 848-858), Harvey of Deols (c. 1130), and Thomas Aquinas regard it as an extraordinary capability for interpreting difficult passages of Holy Writ.⁸ Lanfranc and Lombard teach that the interpretation of tongues is exercised in construing allegorical interpretations of passages in the Prophets or the Gospels.⁹

7 Josef Lössl, "Who Attacked the Monasteries of Jerome and Paula in 416 A.D.?" *Augustinianum* 44 (2004) 91-112, here 109; J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writing, and Controversy* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1999).

8 Sedulius Scottus, *In epistolam ad Corinthios I*, on 1 Cor 12:10, in *Sedulii Scotti Collectaneum in apostolum*, vol. 2, ed. Hermann Josef Frede and Herbert Stanjeks (Freiburg: Herder, 1997) 426: "ALII INTERPRETATIO SERMONUM. Hoc est, ex alia in aliam linguam aut difficilium sermonum explanatio"; my translation: "To another interpretation of tongues. That is, from one language into another, or an explanation of difficult passages." Harvey of Deols [Herveus Burgidolensis], *In epistolam I ad Corinthios*, on 1 Cor 12:10 (PL 181:943): "Alii datur interpretatio sermonum, ut in una lingua sciat obscuros sermones Scripturarum interpretari...."; my translation: "To another is given interpretation of tongues, so that one may know in one language how to interpret the obscure passages of the Scriptures...." Thomas Aquinas, *In epistolam I ad Corinthios*, on 1 Cor 12:10, in *S. Thomae Aquinatis doctoris angelici in omnes S. Pauli apostoli epistolas commentaria*, vol. 1 (Turin: Marietti, 1924) 354: "Alii interpretatio sermonum, id est, difficilium scripturarum"; my translation: "To another interpretation of tongues, that is, of scriptural difficulties."

9 Lanfranc of Bec, *In epistolam I ad Corinthios*, on 1 Cor 12:10 (PL 150:196): "Alii interpretatio sermonum. Sermones vocat, allegoricas prolationes, seu in dictionibus, seu in orationibus, quae in prophetis et Evangeliiis ubi fere reperiuntur, quas qui interpretari sciunt, per gratiam sancti Spiritus, illam scientiam habent"; my translation: "To another interpretation of tongues.

In the version of the Scriptures common to all the medieval commentaries under examination, the Latin for “interpretation of tongues” (1 Cor 12:10) reads not as *interpretatio linguarum* (interpretation of tongues) but as *interpretatio sermonum* (interpretation of words). Whereas the word *lingua* conveys the idea of a tongue, language, or dialect, *sermo* bears the connotation of “a discourse delivered in public, or written out and circulated, for the purpose of religious instruction and grounded generally in some passage of Scripture,” similar in meaning to our English derivative “sermon.”¹⁰ It is, therefore, understandable that medieval exegetes would understand the gift of interpretation of tongues as skill in exposition of Scripture. After hearing, proclaiming, or reading passages from the Prophets or the Gospels, one possessing the gift of interpretation – perhaps the celebrating priest or a designated preacher – would explain a difficulty in a homily, clear up an obscurity, or go beyond the literal sense of the passage in order to disclose its allegorical or fuller meaning. By allegory, the medieval writers refer not to fanciful spiritualizations of biblical passages but rather to theological meanings gathered from the text that go beyond its simple historical details. Such “senses” or “levels” of Scripture include the tropological or moral message of the passage as well as the anagogical or eschatological import of the pericope.¹¹

In the Middle Ages, the gift of interpretation of tongues was a gift of teaching and preaching that functioned in a variety of settings. The most obvious of these settings would have been the liturgies of daily, weekly, and festal Masses and religious services associated

He calls tongues allegorical interpretations that emerge, whether in discourses or in prayers, and which, when they are found to touch upon the Prophets and Gospels, know how to interpret them. That knowledge they have through the grace of the Holy Spirit.” Peter Lombard, *In epistolam I ad Corinthios*, on 1 Cor 12:10 (PL 191:1653): “*alii datur interpretatio sermonum, id est linguarum vel visionum, ut Joseph, vel sermones sunt allegoricae pronuntiationes quae sunt in prophetis et in Evangeliiis*”; my translation: “*To another is given interpretation of tongues, that is, of languages or of visions, as Joseph. Or tongues are allegorical pronouncements which are given on the Prophets and on the Gospels.*”

10 Roy J. Deferrari, *A Latin-English Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Boston: St. Paul, 1960) 603, 961; see also Leo F. Stelten, *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1995) 151, 245.

11 On the medieval understanding of the four senses of Scripture, see Sandra M. Schneiders, “Scripture and Spirituality,” in *Christian Spirituality*, vol 1, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 1-20; Anna C. Esmeijer, *Divina quaternitas* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1978); and the classic Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964).

with the sacraments. Opportunity for expression of this gift would also have been afforded at gatherings in monastic settings such as chapters, where Scripture was read and explained. The gift might also be put to use in educational settings, during morning lectures and afternoon disputations. Interpretation of tongues would also have been operational in the writing of commentaries and treatises interpreting Scripture, especially the “hard sayings” or more difficult passages of the Bible.

The commentator Lanfranc attributed such knowledge of the deeper meanings of Scripture to “the grace of the Holy Spirit.”¹² Since, however, the gift involved the explanation of scriptural passages, it is implied that study was part of preparation for these expositions and that the rational faculties were fully engaged in the delivery of these explanations. This stands in sharp contrast with contemporary notions of the gift of interpretation of tongues, in which the acquisition of the gift is immediate and dependent upon revelation alone, and the delivery of the message is commonly understood as the Holy Spirit making vocalizations through a human functioning as a passive mouthpiece.

MEDIEVAL AND CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDINGS CONTRASTED

For medieval exegetes, the gift of interpretation of tongues is a skill in translating words and content from one language into another for the edification of the Church and an aptitude for explaining the Scriptures, especially its more difficult passages. They affirm the supernatural origin of the gift, but translators are expected, with God’s help, to learn languages by means of the usual, natural process. Expositors likewise are expected to wrestle mentally in preparation for the unraveling of scriptural difficulties. Medieval believers, then, seem to have understood that being gifted with the interpretation of tongues requires more perspiration than inspiration.¹³ Aquinas testifies to this, teaching that although God gave the knowledge of the Scriptures and of all tongues miraculously to the apostles, people now have to acquire the

¹² Lanfranc, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, on 1 Cor 12:10 (PL 150:196): “...per gratiam sancti Spiritus, illam scientiam habent.”

¹³ Medieval clerics who claimed that God revealed the meanings of obscure biblical difficulties to them through visions or immediate supernatural revelation were sometimes viewed with suspicion. On such responses to the claims of Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) and Peter John Olivi (d. 1298), see Bernard McGinn, “The Abbot and the Doctors: Scholastic Reactions to the Radical Eschatology of Joachim of Fiore,” *Church History* 40 (1971) 30-47; David Burr, “The Persecution of Peter Olivi,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 66.5 (1976) 5-90.

same knowledge through arduous study.¹⁴ Demonstrating an approach strikingly different from today's commonly accepted understanding of this charismatic gift, Christians of the Middle Ages expected the rational faculties of the soul to be used to full advantage during the operation of the interpretation of tongues.

Although Scripture attests that abundant miracles accompanied the apostles during the course of their earthly ministry, thereby confirming their message as they preached the gospel and laid the foundation of the Church (as in 2 Cor 12:12; Eph 2:20; Heb 2:3-4),¹⁵ once that initial foundation was laid successfully, subsequent generations did not expect those same miraculous manifestations of grace that had been poured out upon the apostles.¹⁶ Augustine, for example, writing in the early fifth century, testifies that the Christians of his day did not expect to receive a miraculous gift of speaking in tongues when they received the Holy Spirit. This emerges clearly in his rhetorical question: "Why then is the Holy Spirit given now in such wise, that no one to whom It is given speaks with diverse tongues, except because that miracle then prefigured that all nations of the earth should believe, and that thus the Gospel should be found to be in every tongue?"¹⁷

14 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 51, a. 4, in *The Summa theologiae of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, rev. Daniel J. Sullivan, Great Books of the Western World 20 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952) 15.

15 O. Palmer Robertson, *The Final Word: A Biblical Response to the Case for Tongues and Prophecy Today* (Carlisle PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997); Thomas R. Edgar, "The Cessation of the Sign Gifts," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (1988) 371-86.

16 G. Thomas, "The Cessation of the Extraordinary Gifts: Historical Evidence," *Banner of Truth* 118 (1973) 17-21; Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., "The Gift of Tongues in the Post Apostolic Church (A.D. 100-400)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 122 (1965) 134-43. On how the fathers of the Church understood the gift of tongues, see Francis X. Gumerlock, "Tongues in the Church Fathers," *Reformation and Revival* 13.4 (2004) 125-40.

17 Augustine, *Answer to the Letters of Petilian the Donatist* II.74, in *Augustin: The Writings Against the Manichaens, and Against the Donatists*, ed. Philip Schaff, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers [NPNF] series 1, vol. 4 (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1994) 548. See also Augustine's *Homilies on the First Epistle of John* VI.10 (NPNF series 1, vol. 7, p. 42): "In the earliest time the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed: and they spake with tongues, which they had not learned 'as the Spirit gave them utterance.' These signs adapted to the time. For there behoved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, and to show that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. The thing was done for a betokening and it passed away. In the laying on of hands now, that persons may receive the

This does not mean that ancient and early medieval Christians denied the miraculous or believed that the age of miracles had altogether passed away. On the contrary, medieval Christians maintained that God was still pouring out the gift of interpretation of tongues, but they witnessed this gift functioning in their time through translators and biblical expositors.

THE NEED FOR RENEWAL OF THE GIFT OF INTERPRETATION

The Church in regions and countries where English is the dominant language suffers, for the most part, from an inadequate knowledge of how the Fathers of the Church interpreted the difficult passages of Scripture. One reason for this is that many patristic commentaries on the Bible are still unavailable in English translation.¹⁸ This fact is strikingly illustrated in the case of patristic commentaries on Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians. On this epistle, there are over twelve commentaries extant either in their entirety or in fragments from the fourth through the sixth centuries alone. In Greek, these include those of John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrus, Gennadius of Constantinople, and Oecumenius of Tricca. In Latin, there are commentaries by Ambrosiaster, pseudo-Constantius, Pelagius, Casiodorus, and others. Yet only one of these, that of John Chrysostom, has been published in English translation.¹⁹

Holy Ghost, do we look that they should speak with tongues? Or when we laid the hands on these infants, did each one of you look to see whether they would speak with tongues, and when he saw that they did not speak with tongues, was any of you so wrongminded as to say, "These have not received the Holy Ghost; for, had they received they would speak with tongues as was the case in those times?" See also Otto of Vercelli, *In epistolam I ad Corinthios*, on 1 Cor 14:22 (PL 134:392): "*Itaque linguae in signum sunt*, etc. Consuetudo namque fuit in primordio Ecclesiae, ut gratia linguarum daretur credentibus, quatenus infideles incitarentur ad fidem. Sed dilatata jam fide, et multiplicatis fidelibus, cessavit ipsa consuetudo"; my translation: "*And so tongues are for a sign*, etc. For, it was customary in the early Church that the grace of tongues was given to believers, so that unbelievers might be drawn to the faith. But after the faith had spread abroad and the faithful had multiplied, it was no longer customary."

18 Most of the Latin and Greek patristic commentaries on Scripture, in series like *Corpus Christianorum series latina* (over 175 vols.), *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* (over 90 vols.), and the older *Patrologia latina* (221 vols.), and *Patrologia graeca* (161 vols.), remain without modern language translations. Regrettably few biblical commentaries are translated in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* and *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* series.

19 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Thessalonians* (NPNF series 1, vol. 13, pp. 323-98).

This deplorable dearth of patristic commentaries translated into English suggests a distinct and indeed urgent need for a renewal of the gift of interpretation of tongues as it was understood by our medieval forebears. Providing translations into English of commentaries like these will be of immense benefit to the Church in the twenty-first century. A case in point lies in the current discussion about the timing of the “catching away” or rapture mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. It may be asked: did the earliest interpreters of Paul’s First Epistle to the Thessalonians believe that this “catching away” would take place simultaneously with the return of Christ for the Last Judgment, or rather that it would occur years earlier? The former concept is now being advanced by millions of devotees of the *Left Behind* novels.²⁰ I suspect that the former is the case, but English readers may not be sure: patristic commentary on 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is markedly absent from contemporary studies of the rapture teaching, even by those who have striven to bring this theology into dialogue with ancient Christian teaching.²¹ Perhaps this absence of discussion of patristic commentary on this *locus classicus* of “left behind” theology can be accounted for, at least in part, by the lack of English translations of patristic commentaries on that Pauline epistle. Certainly the decline in classical studies and in the knowledge of classical languages has played a decided role in limiting access to such splendid commentaries. Until these treasures of patristic thought are recovered for an English readership, or until more Anglophone institutions of higher education revive and promote a vigorous study of the classics, English-speaking members of the Church, I regret to speculate, will forfeit access to the views of the Fathers concerning the rapture. This is all the more unfortunate because the writings of the Church Fathers on 1 Thessalonians 4:17 are likely to contain information that can help ground the faithful in sound doctrine and prevent them from being tossed about by “every wind of doctrine.”

20 David Malcolm Bennett, *Why Left Behind Should Be Left Behind* (Longwood FL: Xulon, 2005) 11, states that around 60 million copies of the “Left Behind” novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins have been sold. A year earlier, Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder CO: Westview, 2004) x, recorded the number sold as 50 million.

21 For example, patristic commentary on 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is absent in David B. Currie, *Rapture: The End-Time Error That Leaves the Bible Behind* (Manchester NH: Sophia, 2003); see also Carl E. Olson, *Will Catholics Be “Left Behind”?* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003); Paul Thigpen, *The Rapture Trap* (West Chester PA: Ascension, 2001); T. L. Frazier, *A Second Look at the Second Coming: Sorting Through the Speculations* (Ben Lomond CA: Conciliar, 1999).

A renewal of the gift of interpretation of tongues in the form of translations of patristic commentaries promises a further benefit. Because the commentators of the early Church were temporally and geographically closer to the apostles and to their first audiences, the Fathers' comments may aid in bridging cultural gaps between the writers of the New Testament and today's exegetes. Additionally, making Christianity's earliest commentaries accessible to a new generation of readers of English may render less obscure a whole host of "hard sayings" of the apostles. What, for example, did the early Christians think that Paul meant when he spoke of baptisms for the dead (see 1 Cor 15:29), or of a woman having "power on her head because of the angels" (1 Cor 11:10)? To what did patristic writers think John was referring when he mentioned a "sin unto death" (1 Jn 5:16) and "seven spirits of God" (Rv 4:5)? A renewal of the gift of interpretation of tongues, as the medieval Church understood it, can help students of sacred Scripture in the twenty-first century to find answers.

Signs are emerging that such a long overdue renewal is already underway. A variety of publishing companies are now including in their series English translations of patristic commentaries on the Bible which have been hitherto unavailable. These include the recent publication of Origen's exegetical works by The Catholic University of America Press in their Fathers of the Church series, of Cassiodorus' commentary on the Psalms by Paulist Press in its Ancient Christian Writers series, of Theodoret's commentary on the Pauline epistles by Holy Cross Orthodox Press, and of a great amount of patristic exegetical commentary in InterVarsity Press' Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series. As the Holy Spirit continues to equip members of the body of Christ to translate the biblical commentaries of the Fathers of the Church and in the process illuminates the Church regarding scriptural difficulties, it is hoped that the bride of Christ will move steadily forward "to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13). Moreover, glancing back over her venerable patrimony of learning, she will find herself in perfect harmony with the medieval understanding of the gift of interpretation of tongues.

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