

Vellacott, Maurice E. *The Earliest View of New Testament Tongues: Understood as Non-Supernatural, Learned Earthly Languages*. Eugene, OR: Resource, 2024. 356pp. + 12pp. (front matter).

The controversy between Charismatics and non-Charismatics is well into its second century, and the literature, while extensive, has settled into a few standard arguments on each side, with neither side appearing inclined to budge. This book could be characterized as a bomb thrown into the middle of the settling waters, with the potential of shaking things up considerably.

There are essentially two positions on tongues. The Charismatics insist that they were ecstatic speech, while their opponents typically settle on the view that they were ordinary human languages but unlearned: the speakers had never studied the languages they were speaking. Vellacott adds a third view: they were ordinary human languages that the speakers knew as a matter of course, and there was nothing miraculous about them.

Further, as his title indicates, he views this interpretation as the earliest one in the Christian church; he cites Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis (AD 310?–404), who wrote of church members promoting themselves by using languages (Hebrew, the “sacred language,” or a dialect of Greek not common in the region) that their hearers would have difficulty understanding. This would interfere with edification and cause divisions in the church.

Of course, this raises all kinds of questions. Why were the hearers at Pentecost astonished at what they heard? Weren’t they hearing local, tribal languages that the disciples were unlikely to know? Wasn’t the use of tongues at Pentecost miraculous?

Vellacott is Canadian, a former member of the Canadian Parliament, and well educated in biblical studies—holding the MDiv from Canadian Theological Seminary, a DMin from Trinity International University, a PhD from North-West University in South Africa, other doctoral work at Dallas Theological Seminary, and coursework through Jerusalem University College. This book is derived from his PhD dissertation.

Vellacott approaches his argument as follows:

- Chapter 1: Summary of research in the field (as is typical of a dissertation)
- Chapter 2: Linguistic analysis of *γλῶσσα*
- Chapter 3: Cultural analysis of the first-century church and influences on it
- Chapter 4: Historical analysis of the hermeneutical positions on “tongues”
- Chapter 5: Exegetical analysis of the NT use of *γλῶσσα* (Acts 2; 10; 19; 1 Cor 14)
- Chapter 6: Historical analysis of English translations

The linguistic analysis in chapter 2 examines all uses of the word *γλῶσσα* in both the LXX (including the apocrypha) and the NT, with ample reference to Greek grammars old and new, and concludes that there is no hint of ecstatic speech or of any speech incomprehensible to either the hearer or the speaker.

Chapter 3 delves into the cultural influences on the Corinthian church—Roman, Jewish, Aramaic, Greek, and Roman, as well as the Delphic Oracle and the fact of pervasive lack of literacy. These factors provide light that adds considerable credibility to Vellacott’s thesis. He concludes that 1 Corinthians 14 reflects “a controversy around the use of the Hebrew Older Testament Scripture and

classic Greek dialects in the assembly and the need to interpret into the dominant Greek dialect, so others could be edified” (107). In particular, the bias toward Hebrew in non-Hellenized Judaism and the influence of Atticism among the Hellenized provided considerable fuel for the fire of controversy in the church.

Chapter 4 surveys the use of the words *language* and *tongue* throughout church history, from the Apostolic Fathers all the way to Third Wave Charismatism. Vellacott sees significance in the lack of any reference to tongues during the post-apostolic age until Irenaeus in AD 160—and his statement is ambiguous. Irenaeus’s distance from both Corinth and Jerusalem—he was bishop of Lyons in modern France—made him an unreliable commentator in any case. It is also noteworthy that Epiphanius, Ambrosiaster, and Severian, contemporaries, held the same position on tongues, though they were widely separated geographically (160). The view that *tongues* reflects known language, or significant elements of it, continues through Cyril of Alexandria and perhaps Thomas, then Luther and Calvin. Nowhere before the late 1800s is there any significant discussion of tongues as ecstatic speech. Vellacott holds that the idea of ecstatic speech was introduced primarily by Neander and then followed more broadly (235).

Chapter 5, a verse-by-verse exegesis of the NT passages focusing on the word γλῶσσα, is by far the longest chapter in the book. It includes a discussion of the linguistic concept of higher and lower languages (180)—that is, languages that are considered more appropriate for formal occasions (higher) or for everyday conversation (lower). In non-Hellenized Judaism, Hebrew was of course the higher language, the “sacred language,” the language in which the law was given. The Scripture readings in the Temple or the synagogue would be in Hebrew. In the eastern Roman Empire, Aramaic would be spoken in common affairs all the way to Elam; in Corinth, a cosmopolitan double port with extensive commercial traffic, Greek would be commonplace. Nearly everyone could speak one or more dialects of Greek; many could speak Aramaic or Syriac, especially in the East, and those with a Jewish background would at least be able to understand Hebrew. With the friction between Hellenized and non-Hellenized Jews (Acts 6), and later between Jewish and Gentile Christians (Acts 15), there would be ample opportunity for disputes over languages; congregants would want to hear teaching in the language or dialect with which they were most familiar. In a mixed congregation, disagreements would arise.

Vellacott observes that more recent English translations “have insistently used ‘tongues’ in 1 Corinthians, but without hesitation used the term ‘languages’ elsewhere in the New Testament. . . . Modern Bible translators have almost set the mystical term ‘tongues’ in concrete, with commentators ‘describing’ an esoteric phenomenon at Corinth, despite no . . . clear substantiation of it in the Greek biblical text of Acts or Corinthians” (299).

The book does have its weaknesses. It is repetitious, probably because the author seeks to be thorough at each stage. He exhibits some stylistic oddities—“Christ believers” for “Christians,” “Christ assembly” for “church,” and “Older” and “Newer” Testaments. Oddly, about the only place he uses the term *New Testament* is in the book’s title. He seems slightly unfamiliar with recent Greek scholarship; he discusses the significance of the imperfect tense without any reference to aspect (183),

and he speaks of participles as having contemporaneous or subsequent action based entirely on tense (196). I would also suggest that he misapplies Isaiah 28:10–13 (286).

The book is deeply researched and documented, and the author's conclusions are well-founded and defensible throughout. It is worth the reading and the purchase price. Vellacott has done his homework, and he has contributed significantly to the literature.

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