

A patristic perspective on the scope of xenolalic tongues

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Dates:

Received: 22 May 2023

Accepted: 22 Aug. 2023

Published: 23 Nov. 2023

How to cite this article:De Jager, E., 2023, 'A patristic perspective on the scope of xenolalic tongues', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(2), a9037. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i2.9037>**Copyright:**

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Many church fathers have been identified as having held a xenolalic view on the gift of tongues. Scholars who have shown evidence of this have, however, omitted to give sufficient attention to the scope of the tongues the church fathers detailed. Many of these church fathers, referenced, identify the gift of tongues as the ability to speak all languages. This supernatural ability to speak all languages has been appropriately designated as pan-xenolalia. This article aimed to highlight the existence and prevalence of the pan-xenolalic view among the church fathers and examined the works of the relevant church fathers to determine how they gave expression to their view, which passages of Scripture they applied their view to and how they motivated their view. The pan-xenolalic sentiments of many church fathers could be confirmed though they used various phrases to express it. These references to pan-xenolalia were used in the context of both Acts and 1 Corinthians. Their possible motivations for holding this view seemed to have come from sources outside of the text itself, with tradition, expectation and purpose of tongues from their perspective being the most likely influences.

Contribution: The patristic perspective on tongues were not merely xenolalic but pan-xenolalic. Pan-xenolalia as interpretive key to 1 Corinthians 12–14 provides a fresh perspective to reading the text, which may pose some significant challenges to how the text is interpreted. Establishing the veracity of the pan-xenolalic view lays the foundation for scholars to evaluate a reading of 1 Corinthians 14 from this perspective.

Keywords: Acts; 1 Corinthians 12–14; church fathers; xenolalia; pan-xenolalia; gift of tongues; languages; Babel.

Introduction

For many years, Evangelical scholars have been arguing that the gift of tongues constituted xenolalia, and many have pointed to the works of the church fathers to support their view (Busenitz 2006:62; Gumerlock 2004:123–138). The works of the Church Fathers that these scholars reference indeed support the xenolalic, rather than the glossolalic view. Xenolalia refers to speaking a foreign language not learnt by natural process. Nel (2017:1,4) defines xenolalia as 'the miraculous, spontaneous ability to speak a previously unknown language', while he considers glossolalia as 'unintelligible utterances'. In all three the sub-periods of the Patristic Era, being the Apostolic Period (AD 100–150), the time of the Alexandrian School (AD 150–400) and the Church Councils Era (AD 400–590), references to the nature of the gift of tongues can be found, and though the hermeneutic methods used have changed with every period, church fathers who address the topic maintained a xenolalic view. Tertullian is often referenced as supporting a glossolalic view, though this has been shown to be using his work out of context (Swincer 2011:401). Enough references to the nature of the gift of tongues exist to determine with a fair amount of certainty that the majority of church fathers, if not all who address this theme directly, had the same or at least a similar concept of the nature of the gift of tongues.

One aspect that has not been explored by contemporary scholars is the scope of xenolalic tongues. The term 'scope', in this context, refers to the variety or range of languages that the gift of tongues incorporates. Both Gumerlock (2004:123–138) and Busenitz (2006:64, 67) reference sections of the works of church fathers that describe the gift of tongues as encompassing all languages, yet they never highlight this universal scope of tongues or consider what the implications of such a view would be.

A closer look at how broadly a pan-xenolalic view of tongues was held among the church fathers who speak to the nature of tongues is justified. It should also be noted that sections of Scripture,

Note: The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF) has 2 series. The superscript next to the abbreviation in this article indicates which series is being referred to, series 1 or series 2.

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if any, are referenced when a pan-xenolalic view is expressed. It may provide further insight into the way the church fathers understood the text and whether they believed that 1 Corinthians 12–14 speaks to a pan-xenolalic manifestation.

References to tongues as pan-xenolalia

Some of the references to the gift of tongues in the works of the church fathers expressly claim a pan-xenolalic manifestation, while others allude to it without an emphatic phrase claiming such a scope being used. The following references represent a sample of such references:

Origen.

I infer that he is a debtor to the different nations because by the grace of the Holy Spirit he has received *the gift of being able to speak in the tongues of all nations*, as he himself says: 'I speak in tongues more than you all'.

Origen. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. (CER 1.128 [Author's own emphasis])

Though Origen is commenting on Romans, he clearly understands the text to imply that the gift of tongues is the method by which he would fulfil his obligation. Origen claims that the gift of tongues was the ability to speak the languages of every nation, which indicates the universal scope of the gift and quotes from 1 Corinthians, indicating his understanding of tongues in the Corinthian context as xenolalic in nature:

Eusebius of Emesa.

But when he [God] gave literary ability to ignorant men so that they could write gospels, giving the ability to write he also gave the Roman tongue to Galileans, and *the languages of the world to his apostles*, for the teaching and admonition and exhortation of the nations of the world.

Discours conservés en latin 9 de calice 2. (ed. Buytaert 1953:I, 216 [Author's own emphasis])

Eusebius of Emesa uses different phraseology to Origen, but the scope of the gift of tongues, which is contextually in view in his reference, is also all encompassing. What is significant and unique to Eusebius is the claim that the gift was not limited to the spoken word but also included literary ability.

Hilary of Poitiers.

This is that which was spoken through the Prophet, It shall come to pass on the last day, saith the Lord, I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh, and their sons and their daughters shall prophesy. And we learn that all this prophecy was fulfilled in the case of the Apostles, when, after the sending of the Holy Spirit, they all *spoke with the tongues of the Gentiles*.

De Trinitate 8.25. (NPNF² 9:144 [Author's own emphasis])

Hilary has Acts 2 in mind when he claims that the apostles spoke the tongues of the gentiles. The gentile nations and regions mentioned in Acts 2 most likely served as a sample of the greater people groups that were to be reached as the gospel was proclaimed to the ends of the earth.

Cyril of Jerusalem.

And they began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. The Galilean Peter or Andrew spoke Persian or Median. *John and the rest of the Apostles spoke every tongue to those of Gentile extraction*; for not in our time have multitudes of strangers first begun to assemble here from all quarters, but they have done so since that time.

Lecture XVII. Continuation of the Discourse on the Holy Ghost 16. (NPNF² 7:128 [Author's own emphasis])

Like Hilary's reference, Cyril of Jerusalem also points to the universal scope of the gift of tongues attributing to it the ability to speak all the Gentile languages.

Severian of Gabala.

The tongues of angels refer to the *different languages spoken on earth* since the destruction of the tower of Babel. As Moses says in Deuteronomy [32:8]: 'God has set the boundaries of the nations according to the number of angels'. It is therefore the task of each angel to defend the distinction of nations. The tongues of men on the other hand are languages which we learn; they do not come to us naturally.

Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church. (NTA 15:268 [Author's own emphasis])

Severian brings 1 Corinthians 13:1 into the fray by explaining that the languages of angels mean the various languages spoken throughout history since the confusion of the single language and the establishment of many (Gn 11). This may indicate that he did not regard tongues in Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians as two distinct manifestations.

Rufinus.

Our forefathers have handed down to us the tradition that, after the Lord's ascension, when, through the coming of the Holy Ghost, tongues of flame had settled upon each of the Apostles, *that they might speak diverse languages, so that no race however foreign, no tongue however barbarous, might be inaccessible to them and beyond their reach*, they were commanded by the Lord to go severally to the several nations to preach the word of God.

Commentary on the Apostles Creed. (NPNF² 3:542 [Author's own emphasis])

Rufinus, like the church fathers referenced before him, also assigns a universal scope to the gift of tongues though he uses significantly different terms in doing so. Contextually his reference to diverse tongues do not point to only a few languages. He emphatically state that no foreign language was beyond the ability of the apostles to understand and speak:

Augustine of Hippo.

Was that the night when the Holy Spirit came, and, filling all who were in one place, gave them the power of *speaking in the tongues of every nation*?

Tractate XLIV.5. (NPNF¹ 7:246 [Author's own emphasis])

For the Holy Ghost was at that time given in such sort, that He even visibly showed Himself to have been given. For *they who received Him spake [sic] with the tongues of all nations; to signify that the Church among the nations was to speak in the tongues of all*.

Sermon 49. (NPNF¹ 6:419 [Author's own emphasis])

All the people present had learned one language. The Holy Spirit came, they were filled with it, *they began to speak with the different languages of all nations which they didn't know, and hadn't learned.* But the one who had come was teaching them; he entered, they were filled, he poured out from them. And then there was enacted this sign; whoever received the Holy Spirit, suddenly, filled with the Spirit, *started speaking with the tongues of all; not only those hundred and twenty.* The text itself teaches us this; when people believed, they were baptized, they received the Holy Spirit, they *spoke with the tongues of all nations.*

Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons 267.2. (PL 38:1230 [Author's own emphasis])

Augustine of Hippo's references to the gift of tongues as the ability to speak 'the tongues of every nation', 'the tongues of all' and 'the different languages of all nations which they didn't know, and hadn't learned' can leave no question about his understanding of the scope of the gift. Especially in the last reference, he seems to drive the point home by repetitively emphasising all tongues and languages:

Theodoret of Cyrus.

But the divine apostles were given the gift of tongues by the grace of the Spirit, *knowing all languages to be teachers to all nations, preaching to each in their familiar language.*

Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians 12:1. (PG 82:319 [Author's own emphasis])

Theodorus joins the chorus of church fathers that claim that the apostles received the ability to speak all languages in order to teach all nations. As with Augustine, the repetition of 'all' drives home the point.

Gregory the Great.

The Holy Spirit appeared in tongues of fire over the disciples, and gave them *the knowledge of all languages.*

Homilies on the Gospels, Homily 30.4. (PL 79:1087 [Author's own emphasis])

The knowledge of a language implies being able to both understand and speak it. The knowledge of all languages would be the ability to both understand and speak every language known to man. That seems to be the understanding of the church fathers when considering the sample of their works surveyed above.

Synonymous phrases such as 'all languages', 'with the tongues of all', 'different languages of all nations', 'tongues of all nations', 'the tongues of every nation', 'the knowledge and understanding of all languages', 'diverse languages [that leave] no race however foreign, no tongue however barbarous ... beyond their reach', 'the different languages spoken on earth', 'the languages of all men', 'every tongue to those of Gentile extraction', 'the tongues of the Gentiles' and 'the languages of the world' are used to indicate pan-xenolalia. These different phrases all

express the universal scope of the gift of tongues and show how different church fathers from different periods during the Patristic Era shared the same view on the scope of xenolalic tongues.

It may be argued that the universal scope of tongues represents the ability that was given to the whole body of Christ and not each individual who received the gift. Two references from different church fathers seem to contradict such a view. Firstly, Jerome narrates:

Ten days had elapsed, we are told, from the Lord's ascension and fifty from His resurrection, when the Holy Spirit came down, and the tongues of the believers were cloven, so that *each spoke every language.*

Letter XLI. To Marcella. (NPNF² 6:55 [Author's own emphasis])

Augustine of Hippo in turn declared:

Each *individual was speaking in all tongues*, because the Church that was going to exist in all tongues was being foretold. One individual was the sign of unity; *all tongues in one individual*, that meant all nations in that unity.

Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons 266.2. (PL 38:1230 [Author's own emphasis])

Though these two references by no means serve as evidence that every church father who held a pan-xenolalic view of tongues believed that every single gifted individual were able to speak all languages, they may well be representative of how at least some of the other church fathers understood the gift. Conversely, no church father surveyed expressly claims that the pan-xenolalic range of the gift was reflective of the corporate and not the individual ability.

In other instances, a pan-xenolalic view may be implied without an explicit statement to that effect being used. In Acts 2:9–11, various languages or regions indicate a diversity of languages were spoken on Pentecost. Similarly, the Church Fathers also name nations as representative of their language(s), but in other instances they name the languages. These languages that the church fathers mention are often not listed in Acts 2, which likely indicates their understanding that the Acts 2 list is not exhaustive of the languages spoken on Pentecost.

Rufinus' writings probably give the best expression to the idea that the term 'diverse languages' may refer to all languages when he states that the Apostles:

[S]peak diverse languages, so that no race however foreign, no tongue however barbarous, might be inaccessible to them and beyond their reach, they were commanded by the Lord to go severally to the several nations to preach the word of God. (NPNF² 3:542 [Author's own emphasis])

He does not refer to 'all languages', but to 'diverse languages', which is then qualified by indicating that he indeed considered 'diverse languages' to be any language encountered. Furthermore, there can be little doubt that Rufinus believed

that the gift of tongues was pan-xenolalia, as he later writes that the Apostles were 'endowed with the knowledge and understanding of all languages' (NPNF² 3:543). It is therefore reasonable to assume that where diverse languages are mentioned, the intention may be to refer to pan-xenolalia without specifying as much.

John Chrysostom, in *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, Homily XXXV (NPNF¹ 12:208 [Author's own emphasis]), speaks of 'the many tongues [that] frequently met in one man' and then states that 'the gift was called the gift of tongues because he could all at once speak divers [sic] languages'. His use of 'many languages' and 'diverse languages' referencing Pentecost in juxtaposition to Babel may well indicate that he meant these terms to represent all the languages that originated at Babel. It is therefore possible that some church fathers would not specify 'all languages' or some synonymous term (and would be factually more correct), while still being convinced that the gift was the ability to speak to anyone that was encountered irrespective of language.

It should be noted that there is a great difference between literally having spoken in all languages and being able to converse in any language encountered. It is conceivable that the expression 'all languages' or its synonyms simply implies being able to speak to any foreigner encountered regardless of their native language.

The Babel narrative as possible allusion to pan xenolalia

Some church fathers, such as Irenaeus (ANF 1:576), Cyril of Jerusalem (NPNF² 7:128), Gregory Nizianzus (NPNF² 7:384–385), Philastrius (CSEL 38:63), Chrysostom (NPNF¹ 12:208–209), Rufinus (NPNF² 3:543), Augustine of Hippo (PL 38:1234–1235) and Gregory the Great (PL 79:1087), bring the Babel narrative into the discussion on tongues, interpreting the gift as a kind of reversal of the confusion event. Unlike scholarship of the last two centuries, which tends to not consider Genesis 1–11 as historical (Gnuse 2019:20–25; Van Oudshoorn 2015:1–19; Westermann 1984:20), Jewish tradition refers to the Babel narrative, which falls into those chapters, as a literal, historical event.

The following references serve as a sample of how they understood the connection:

Gregory Nizianzus said 'the old Confusion of tongues was laudable, when men who were of one language in wickedness and impiety, even as some now venture to be, were building the Tower' leading to the division, but then continues to explain how tongues at Pentecost 'brings them again into harmony' (NPNF² 7:384–385).

He also highlights the restorative effect the gift of tongues had on the confusion caused at Babel and continues to mention some nations not listed in Acts 2 as representative of 'every nation under heaven'. His reference to Babel seems to support his pan-xenolalic view of the gift of tongues.

Philastrius, likewise, refers to:

[A]ll the knowledge of languages which offending people have lost twenty-seven hundred years earlier, [that] the Lord conferred again through the Holy Spirit at the time of the blessed apostles after his ascension without any effort upon those who believed, as it is written in the Acts of the Apostles. (CSEL 38:63 [Author's own emphasis])

He then continues to express his belief that the gift constituted 'the knowledge of all languages'.

Following the biblical genealogy and dating, the reference to languages lost can only refer to the Babel event in Philastrius' comment. His belief that the Pentecost event restored the ability to speak to those of other languages seems clear, and it is significant that he mentions that 'the knowledge of languages was given without learning', implying all languages.

Rufinus commented:

Right justly, then, were the former, when, on the eve of separation, they builded [sic] a tower of pride, condemned to the confusion of tongues, so that no one might understand his neighbour's speech; while the latter, who were building a tower of faith, were endowed with the knowledge and understanding of all languages; so that the one might prove a sign and token of sin, the other of faith.

Commentary on the Apostles Creed. (NPNF² 3:543 [Author's own emphasis])

Rufinus also subscribed to the idea of the gift of tongues as a restoration of the ability lost at Babel, which was that no language barrier separated people. As such, the gift of tongues, to him, was 'the knowledge and understanding of all languages' for the sake of spreading the gospel.

In some cases, like Philastrius and Rufinus's comments, all languages are specified, but it does not seem unreasonable to consider the references to the Babel narrative by other church fathers, when reflecting on the gift of tongues, as allusions to a pan-xenolalic manifestation. Babel, as the biblical origin of the diversity of languages, serves as the image or token for depicting all languages when juxtaposed with the gift of tongues.

Pan-xenolalia in Acts and 1 Corinthians 12–14

Kovacs (2005:229) correctly notes, as will soon be evident, that 'Patristic authors, like later interpreters, tend to understand 1 Corinthians 12–14 and Acts 2 to refer to the same phenomenon'. No example of a Church Father making a distinction between tongues in Acts and tongues in 1 Corinthians could be found in any of the patristic sources surveyed. The trend of a xenolalic interpretation of Acts and 1 Corinthians prevails. But do references to pan-xenolalia in the context of 1 Corinthians exist?

Origen (CER 1.128–130) brings 'the gift of being able to speak in the tongues of all nations', thus a pan-xenolalic

manifestation, into the Corinthian context by quoting from 1 Corinthians 14:18, and then alluding to 1 Corinthians 12:7 and 14:2–4 when he highlights that the gifts are given not for the benefit of self, but for the common good. He then points to how the gift placed an obligation on Paul to preach to those whose languages he could speak, which would be people from every nation he encountered. Though referring to 1 Corinthians in his reference, Origen is commenting on Romans 1:14–16 in which Paul speaks of his indebtedness to Greeks, Barbarians and Jews to preach the gospel to them. This was the core function of tongues in Acts 2:15–41, where the gospel message was also preached to people from various parts of the world speaking a variety of languages. In Origen's estimation, the function and nature of tongues in Acts and 1 Corinthians were the same.

The works of Eusebius of Emesa (ed. Buytaert 1953:I, 216), Ambrosiaster (CSEL 81:155), Hilary of Poitiers (NPNF² 9:144–147), Irenaeus (ANF 1:531), Philastrius (CSEL 38:63), Chrysostom (NPNF¹ 12:208–209), Jerome (CSEL 55:494–450) and Theodoret of Cyrus (PG 82:319) all show evidence that they applied their view of the gift of tongues to the Corinthian context. The works of several church fathers reflect the view that the gift in Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12–14 was the same manifestation. Busenitz (2006:62) therefore correctly claims that the church fathers 'never suggest that the tongues experienced by the apostles at Pentecost were different from the tongues experienced by the Corinthian believers'. According to the abovementioned church fathers, 1 Corinthians then speaks of pan-xenolalia.

The basis for a pan-xenolalic view among the church fathers

It is not clear what the pan-xenolalic claims of the church fathers surveyed are based on, as the text of Acts and 1 Corinthians certainly does not explicitly make such a claim. It would admittedly be impossible for them to make such a claim on factual or scientific grounds. During the Patristic Era, much of the world and several continents were not yet known to the 'civilized world' of their day and therefore also not the plethora of languages spoken in these unknowns.

There seems to be three possible motivations for a pan-xenolalic claim that can be deduced from the writings of the church fathers. Firstly, the perceived connection between the Pentecost and Babel events where the nations of all humanity were divided according to language and assigned to angels to oversee may have caused some Church Fathers to believe the scope of the gift of tongues, which in a sense counteracted Babel, was universal as well. Secondly, the claims of a pan-xenolalic scope of tongues may have come about because of narrative traditions on how the apostles, gifted with tongues, were able to communicate with people from all

languages without exception. Rufinus claims as much in *Commentary on the Apostles Creed* (NPNF² 3:542) when he says, 'Our forefathers have handed down to us the tradition ...' and then goes ahead to express pan-xenolalic sentiments. The third possibility is linked to the purpose of tongues, according to the church fathers. They believed tongues empowered the disciples for evangelism. This may have led to Acts 1:8 in Luke's theology, Romans 1:14–16 in Paul's theology and Matthew 28:19–20, being understood as pointing to universal evangelistic efforts that would require the knowledge of all languages to achieve. The Church Fathers do not mention Matthew 28:19–20 in direct relation to tongues but Acts 1:8 is alluded to and Romans 1:14–16 is sometimes referenced.

Implications of a pan-xenolalic reading of 1 Corinthians 12–14

When reading 1 Corinthians 12–14 from a pan-xenolalic perspective, several challenges seem to arise from the outset. Why does no one understand the tongue speaker in 14:2 and does the speaker understand him or herself? Why would the tongue speaker only build himself in verse 4? Why would verse 9 speak of unintelligible speech if the speaker can indeed speak all languages? Why would the speaker have to pray that he or she can interpret the tongue if the gift is the ability to speak all languages? Surely translation would be an inherent ability of being able to speak all languages? What would the difference between speaking with the mind and speaking with the spirit be in a pan-xenolalic context? Why would the speaker speak in a tongue, rather than with the mind, in church?

The pan-xenolalic reading of 1 Corinthians 14 creates many questions that will have to be answered in order to make sense of the text and would likely demand a very different interpretation than what is extant in contemporary scholarship on tongues. The church fathers left us with a significant number of commentaries on 1 Corinthians 12–14, which will contribute to understanding their interpretation of the text. Such an endeavour will have to be guided by an open mind to allow for a very different interpretation to what both Evangelical and Pentecostal scholarship hold today.

Conclusion

The references to the gift of tongues in the works of the church fathers considered in this article indicate a scope of tongues that is not limited to one or just a few languages. Some specifically claim the gift of tongues to be the ability to speak all human languages or pan-xenolalia. The pan-xenolalic view the church fathers held constitutes a perception or anticipation rather than an expression of fact.

The claim of a pan-xenolalic manifestation may seem very bold but is prevalent and explicitly stated in the writings of several church fathers. They point to a universal scope for the

range of tongues by using different phrases that express pan-xenolalic sentiments. Some of the church fathers also believed the pan-xenolalic scope of tongues is not an expression of the corporate ability of the body of Christ, but rather of the range of languages each individual gifted with tongues was endowed with.

A pan-xenolalic reading of 1 Corinthians holds significant implications for the interpretation of the text especially when it comes to 1 Corinthians 14. Approaching 1 Corinthians 12–14 with pan-xenolalia as an interpretive key will undoubtedly challenge the way contemporary scholarship interprets these chapters. The comments of the church fathers on these passages may make a significant contribution to our understanding of their reading of the text and deserve closer consideration.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

E.d.J. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are that of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author and the publisher.

Abbreviations

- ANF A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. 10 vols. Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature, 1885–1896. Reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1951–1956. Reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994.
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- CSEL *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*. Vienna, 1866–3882.
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- PG J.-P. Migne, ed. *Patrologia Graeca*. 166 vols. Paris: Petit-Montrouge: apud. J.-P. Migne, 1857–1886.
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