

A Tongues Misconception — Exposed!

There is a common misconception that tongues began at Pentecost, and were 'something new'. In fact, there are references to the tongues experience in earlier Jewish literature.

Philo, a Jewish writer contemporary with Jesus, noted a tradition concerning Sinai:

"it was the Father of the universe who delivered these ten maxims, or oracles, or laws and enactments, as they truly are, to the whole assembled nation of men and women altogether ... he at that time wrought a most conspicuous and evidently holy miracle, commanding an invisible sound to be created in the air ... which fashioned the air and stretched it out and changed it into a kind of flaming fire, and so sounded forth so loud and articulate voice like a breath passing through a trumpet ... the power of God, breathing forth vigorously, aroused and excited a new kind of miraculous voice, and diffusing its sound in every direction, made the end more conspicuous at a distance than the beginning, implanting in the soul of each individual another hearing ... the flame being endowed with articulate speech in a language familiar to the hearers." (De Decalogo. IX-XI)

So there was a fascinating tradition of tongues before the Pentecost experience (see also the Testament of Job). Philo's tradition of events at Sinai may even provide an explanation of what the events at Pentecost meant in Jewish thought of the time. Jewish tradition is that Pentecost falls on the same day as the giving of the Mosaic Law at Sinai. Just as Moses mediated the first covenant at Sinai, the Lord Jesus mediated the better covenant at Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:18-24).

Note the similarities of Moses' experience with the Acts 2 experience. There was a new covenant, people of all nations present, a mighty sound, a tongue of fire, and a voice touching each listener personally. It seems that the Lord wrought the same miracle in Jerusalem as was said to have occurred previously at Sinai. There were tongues in the first covenant, and the Pentecostal tongues showed that the Lord had cut a New Covenant.

Because of the tradition Philo explains, many maintain that the Acts 2 tongues were not necessarily meant as a normative sign every time someone received the Spirit. The tongues were a sign of God's new covenant cut with humankind, with comparisons to the Sinai covenant tradition. Tongues are, in fact, a very poor indication of whether someone is saved or not, as is discussed in the next article.

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