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Glossolalia in Historical Perspective

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QUESTION: What is the first recorded incidence of glossolalia? Most likely answer: The Pentecost account given in Acts 2:1-13.

Many Christians would no doubt be surprised to learn that instances of frenzied speech predate the account of glossolalia in Acts by several hundred years. Although masses of contemporary Christians have been exposed to tongue-speaking, they seem to have little appreciation either for its ancestral heritage or its relatively modern expression in non-Western cultures. In order to assess the validity of the current resurgence of glossolalia, one must have some knowledge of its origin. Even a brief his-

torical review demonstrates its spotted acceptability as a legitimate means of religious expression.

While it is at times suspect to reduce religious phenomena and personalities to categories, this method offers the simpler approach to glossolalia. Where within the broad scope of religious personalities does the glossolalist fit? There is but one class, that order known as prophets. The history of religions is replete with testimony affirming the validity of the prophetic personality as a spokesman of deity. Generally speaking, the communication of deity to or through the prophetic personality occurs when the prophet is in a mental state defined as ecstasy. Literally the word *ecstasy* means "to be beside one's self" or "to be out of one's senses." Pathologically speaking it denotes the state of a person when consciousness is lost by absorption in an idea and as a result the person is insensible to his environment.

Ecstasy may manifest itself in one of two ways, lethargic or orgiastic. Lethargic ecstasy is quiet or contemplative as seen in Israelite classical prophets such as Isaiah or Hosea or in the guru of India. Orgiastic ecstasy is distinguished by heightened physical and emotional states and is to be observed in such religious figures as the Israelite ecstatic prophets and the Muslim dervish. Those who speak in unknown languages (that is, glossolalists) fall under the category of orgiastic prophetic personalities.

There is a well-delineated progression of events related to entrance into a state of orgiastic ecstasy. Ecstasy is seldom, if ever, identifiable in the history of religions as an instantaneous action. The normal process moves along the following lines: (1) quiet meditation, (2) audible or inaudible prayer, and (3) reflection upon deity. Slow rhythmic chants, dance, and/or music may be employed. Drugs or alcohol also may be utilized to assist in inducing the desired state. The state is advanced by an increased tempo in music, chants, and bodily movements accompanied by an increasing rate of respiration and heartbeat. As the state is identified and heightened, it reaches a climax. That climax may be defined as the state of ecstasy. It is in this state that the prophetic personality receives mental impressions. These impressions surface in the form of visions or auditions.¹

Alfred Guillaume attempts an explanation of ecstasy by affirming that the state cannot be one of dreaming, for the person is in a state of inten-

¹For a full discussion see I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971)

sified wakefulness. It cannot be defined as hallucination since it is temporary or even momentary enhancement without disintegration of mental capacities. In addition, it cannot be a type of poetical imagination since the state is passive mentally. Ecstasy is rather the enhancement of a state of inspiration.²

The practitioners of glossolalia are definitely prophetic. Simply put, wherever one finds religious man, he finds the prophetic personality. Additionally, wherever we find the prophetic personality, we find ecstatic experience. And, wherever we find ecstatic experience, we find evidences of enigmatic prophetic utterance.

MESOPOTAMIAN PRACTICES

In ancient Mesopotamian religion (c. 2000-1500 B.C.) at least three different ecstatic personalities are identifiable. Each is categorized by the media used to convey the message of deity. These were (1) oral pronouncement, (2) sleep revelations (that is, dreams), and (3) physical signs, such as jerking, facial contortions, and the like, unusual physical features or physical abnormalities. Categories one and two are most important to this study.

The first category is of particular interest to the student or devotee of glossolalia. This type of revelation is always associated with that which Leo Oppenheim describes as "prophetic ecstasis,"³ which refers to a specific instance of ecstasy. Of growing interest, however is the second category of sleep revelations which are attested to in some ancient texts found at Mari, an Amonite state situated on the Euphrates in Mesopotamia. These texts date from the second millennium B.C.

The Mari documents refer to both men and women as givers of oracles. In certain texts the prophetic individual is designated by the term *Muhhum*. Basically, *Muhhum* means "to be beside one's self" or "to be put out of one's mind." Undoubtedly the name was given to this group due to their extraordinary physical and mental states. In Accadia the Mahhu group were actually priests, thus within the boundaries of an acceptable religious es-

² Alfred Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), p. 293.

³ A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 221.

tablishment, who worked through the media of ecstatic inspiration to receive and convey messages from deity.⁴ Many of the same texts refer to such priests as 'a *mel-ili* (that is, godsmen) which may imply unique possession by the spirit of the god.

Herbert B. Huffman, in a most excellent study of prophetic materials from the Mari archives, has shown that some twenty of a group of one thousand letters are concerned with the ecstatic prophetic experience.⁵ In these letters there is ample evidence to demonstrate that the ecstatic individual received messages from deity which he delivered orally to a specific person. Whereas most of the documents appear to refer to messages received in an ecstatic state and subsequently relayed to a recipient, one such message was delivered while in the state of ecstasy rather than subsequent to the seizure.

Accounts of ecstatic personalities who were not priests are recorded in other documents. These individuals were subject to ecstasy and spoke messages from deity. One such individual is referred to as "a certain wife of a citizen." Although the vast majority of the messages are related to a dream state or placed in the category of sleep revelations, one case refers to a dream which came during the day and apparently in a public place. Quite likely this implies a visionary ecstatic experience which was vocalized.

Another text relates a most intriguing situation. On a particular occasion in a sanctuary a "strange voice" (that is, one somewhat unintelligible) repeatedly spoke. This text does not clarify the situation as to whether the "strange voice" was from within or without the prophetic personality. It is, however, to my knowledge the earliest reference known of the possible use of some unintelligible tongue during an ecstatic experience.

Every indication is given in this body of Mari correspondences to indicate that communications emanating from an ecstatic state were considered to be outside the generally accepted boundaries of religious experience. The one exception is that of the Mahhu priests. Most letters relating this type of religious communication contain references to efforts to verify the

⁴Alfred O. Haldar, *Associations of Cult Prophets among the Ancient Semites* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1945), pp. 21 ff.

⁵Herbert B. Huffman, "Prophecy in the Mari Letters," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 4 (December 1968): 101-24.

experience. Additionally, clarifications of the messages were sought. Divination was generally practiced by the Mesopotamians to determine the will of the gods. Thus, the verification or the authentication of ecstatic utterance was placed in the hands of a priest who was an expert in divination. Consequently the prophetic message was held to strict accountability by the established religion of the state.

Other texts seemingly imply an association between music, alcohol, and ecstaticism. Alcohol and music apparently were used as aids to ecstasy or as means of more quickly conditioning the individual to arrive at an intense state of inspiration.

As a general rule, Mesopotamian ecstaticism was associated with the lower economic and social classes. It was considered to be on the same level as sorcery or wizardry by official religious orders. There is enough reference to the phenomenon, however, to surmise that this type experience was at the center of Mesopotamian folk religion. It may also be assumed that ecstatic personalities occupied positions of prime religious influence among the farming and shepherd communities.

EGYPTIAN PRACTICES

While Mesopotamian evidences are fairly extensive, there is but scant evidence from Egypt. The most intriguing of these, however, is found in the document entitled "The Journey of Wen-Amon to Phoenicia" (c. 1117 B.C.).⁶ The story is rather delightful as it records the misadventures of Wen-Amon on a trip to the coast of Syria. Wen-Amon was commissioned to obtain lumber for a ceremonial barge to be constructed in honor of the god, Amon. Upon arrival at Byblos, Wen-Amon fell into the hands of a designing local ruler, Zakar-Baal, who thwarted every attempt by Wen-Amon to conclude his assignment. During the period of Wen-Amon's forced internment, an Egyptian youth in his company, possibly a court page, was caught up in a violent state of ecstasy when he stood before Amon's sacred image. While the youth was in this state, the god, Amon, spoke through him. The young man's seizure was considered to be prophetic frenzy. The

⁶John A. Wilson, "The Journey of Wen-Amon to Phoenicia," *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 25-29.

text reads as follows: "Now while he was making offering to his gods, the god seized one of the youths and made him possessed."⁷

Wen-Amon accepts the situation without any undue anxiety as if this was an accustomed occurrence. Even when the god spoke through the young man, it produced no alarm. There is no evidence in this document of speaking in unknown tongues.

Herodotus, the father of history, does however refer to a religious ceremony associated with the Cult of Isis which culminated in an ecstatic frenzy. Under the influence of this strong emotional frame of mind, the worshipers frequently self-inflicted wounds upon their bodies while from their lips poured a veritable babel of voices.⁸

CANAANITE PRACTICES

The reaction of Zakar-Baal to the ecstatic seizure of one of Wen-Amon's company points to the typical Canaanite response to messages from deity spoken in the state of ecstasy. Immediately upon hearing the message, Zakar-Baal enters into serious negotiations with Wen-Amon. This ultimately resulted in a successfully concluded business agreement. Such an act on the part of Zakar-Baal, the Canaanite ruler, reflects a high regard for such messages from deity.

That messages from the gods delivered during ecstatic seizures were a part of Canaanite religious expression is clearly denoted in the biblical account of the contest on Mt. Carmel. The narrative, which focuses upon the prophet Elijah and the priest and prophets of Baal, is a classic in biblical literature (see 1 Kings 18).

As the story of the contest evolves, the prophets of Baal work themselves into an ecstatic frenzy. They are so translated beyond normal behavior that they slice their own flesh with ceremonial knives. Their dance is so violent under the impact of ecstasy that they are finally reduced to limping about the altar. The King James Version translates the words to indicate that in this state they "prophesied." In the Revised Standard Version, the same Hebrew term is translated "raving." What does the biblical

⁷Ibid., p. 26.

⁸George Rawlinson, trans., *The History of Herodotus* (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1947), p. 102.

terminology imply? A literal translation of the Hebrew means to “behave as a prophet”—or “to be in an ecstatic state.”

The manner of behavior not only implies violent physical motion but vocal utterance. We would do no violence to the text to intimate this utterance was in the form of guttural expressions, a din of sound produced by the voicing of unintelligible syllables. This, to the Canaanites, denoted invasion of the person by the spirit of Baal. It was the voicing of dark and mysterious messages.

HITTITE PRACTICES

Although there are no specific Hittite documents which refer to a phenomenon closely allied to glossolalia, there is sufficient documentation to point out a possible relationship. Among the Hittites there were at least four types of official religious personalities: (1) prophets, (2) priests, (3) sibyls, and (4) private persons who were the recipients of dreams of a prophetic nature. These categories are quite similar to those of Mari, and we may suppose they fulfilled somewhat similar functions. In extant documents, the Hittite prophetic group is the one referred to as declaring messages. We can only ponder as to whether or not they were delivered in an ecstatic state. If they were and if they followed the contemporary pattern, then the messages may well have been delivered in some incomprehensible language.

ISRAELITE PRACTICES

Israelite ecstatic prophets appear for the first time in a clearly identifiable way in those narratives dealing with the elevation of Saul to tribal leadership. It is apparent that the ecstatic group arose in the religious and political vacuum created by the Philistine oppression.

Several remarkable features of the ecstatic prophets are revealed in the accounts. We find they used harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre as aids to achieve the state of ecstasy (see 1 Samuel 10:5-6). In other instances dance is employed (2 Samuel 6:16), and the use of wine is implied (1 Samuel 10:3). Whenever the Spirit of God invaded one of these men, the man was considered to be “turned into another man” (1 Samuel 10:6). One of the curious manifestations of this prophetic ecstasis was the act of dancing naked. Implications are that this was a customary act of one caught up in this particular religious fervor (1 Samuel 10:24; 2 Samuel 6:30). Once the state of ecstasis had been reached prophesying occurred, and we may well sur-

mise that the utterances were not identifiable as any specific language system.

This primitive Israelite religious experience had three facets which are recognizable in modern glossolalia. (1) The religious ecstasy was contagious. Saul's messengers, Saul, and even David succumbed to the communicable nature of the act. As such, they were turned into different men (1 Samuel 10:3-8; 20:19-24; 2 Samuel 6:16-23). (2) Those who practiced ecstaticism were gregarious (1 Samuel 10:5, 10; 1 Kings 22:6ff.; 2 Kings 2.3ff., 7 ff.; 9.1ff.) Without exception they are referred to as being in groups or companies. Saul came into contact with one such band near Gibeah (1 Samuel 10: 8, 10). Samuel appears to have found such a band at Ramah (1 Samuel 19:18). Second Kings indicates that companies were associated with the towns of Bethel (2 Kings 2:3), Jericho (2 Kings 2:5), and Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38). (3) The act of prophesying was considered to be an invasion of the individual by the Spirit of God, and the vocal message conveyed was considered to have issued from the impinging Spirit of God (1 Samuel 10:6, 10; 11:6).

As was the case with the Mari ecstasies, the Israelite ecstasies were looked upon as a marginal religious group. That is to say, they did not comply with the acceptable standards of religious conduct in their day. That their moral and social standing was dubious is evidenced by the amazement and dismay of Saul's friends when he succumbed to ecstaticism. They could scarcely believe his association with a disreputable group. The wording of the phrases "What has come over the son of Kish?" and "Is Saul also among the prophets?" denotes consternation and disbelief on their part (1 Samuel 10:11). Perhaps an even more incisive view of the low esteem of this Israelite group is found in 1 Samuel 6:20. Michal, daughter of Saul and wife of David, upbraided her husband for his involvement in ecstaticism and prophesying. According to Michal, her husband had acted as one of the wild, reckless, uncouth men! Reinforcing this position is the stance of an eighth-century classical prophet. Amos boldly repudiated the intimation that he was an ecstatic, and his words imply that they constituted, in his mind, an inferior class of prophets (Amos 7:14).

ARABIC PRACTICES

Steeped in the antiquity of Near Eastern tribal culture and hidden beneath the unknown canopy of history stand two ecstatic personages of tremendous powers: the *Kahin* and the dervish.

The *Kahin* was and is a tribal seer or soothsayer. His primary function was to communicate oracles and only as a subsidiary action did he divine the future. Remarkably, this religious individual stands in the center of a hoary line of ecstatic succession. The *Kahin* would enter a state of ecstasy and in this state become the spokesman of the *jinn* (that is, impersonal spirits). This indwelling of the *jinn*, clearly similar in nature to the concept of the indwelling of the Spirit of God, would result in the conveying of messages.

A pertinent case at point is presented by Alois Musil in the *Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins*. A *Kahin* is called upon to bring healing to one who is sick. Through the use of music, especially that of heavy rhythmic drum beats accompanied by increasingly violent contortions of the body, the *Kahin* enters a state of ecstasy. He casts himself upon the body of the patient, mumbling unintelligible words. He speaks in voices! At times the sick are healed; at other times they die. All, however, who witness the event claim that the unintelligible message is the vocalized word of Allah.

The dervish constitutes a group which Johannes Lindblom feels arose within the context of Islam to provide an element of personal communion with Allah.⁹ If this indeed is the case, then its similarity to the modern search for ecstasis which culminates in glossolalia is clearly affirmed.

A dervish utilizes certain conditioning agents to achieve a state in which he will become the spokesman of Allah. Contemplation, repetition of the divine name, recitation of creeds, religious formulas, prayers, and passages from the Quran are effectively used to induce a state of ecstasy. Vocalization of the literature is, at first, slow and deliberate, but then the momentum increases at an alarming rate. Suddenly the recitations are punctuated again and again with the explosive syllable *hu*. As the tempo increases, so does bodily movement, and the climax is an ecstatic delirium. In this state prophecies are given. These are considered to be messages from the realm of the spirit. Again there is the striking parallel to glossolalia, for the messages are quite often delivered in no known language. Rather, they seem to be little more than elongated dialogues composed of curious syllables emphasized with the explosive formula *hu*.

⁹Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), p. 9.

GREEK PRACTICES

The sophistication of the Greeks did not preclude their acceptance of a type of glossolalia. This was especially true in relationship to worship connected with the oracles and mystery religions.

At Delphi, for instance, when one consulted the sibyls, the communique from the gods was apt to be obscure. Therefore it was necessary for a priest to interpret the oracle. The oracles of the Delphi sibyl were delivered during a state of possession or ecstatic seizure. As such, the messages were very enigmatic and delivered in a language not akin to any known.

Aeschylus in his *Agamemnon* presents the case with excellent clarity in the speeches between Cassandra and the chorus. Cassandra is considered to be a prophetess and the chorus chants:

Thou art crazed, on gusts of God-sent madness born!
Thyself the theme of thy sad ecstasy!

Cassandra protests that the chorus does not understand what she says and speaks:

And yet I speak good Greek, your tongue I know too well.

The chorus answers in reply:

So doth the Pythian oracle,
Yet are his divinations wondrous dark

Cassandra in her replies says of herself:

Why do I shrink? Why do I wail?

In essence, Cassandra is looked upon as one possessed by the gods, and as a result she speaks messages unknown to those about her. She is referred to as *prophētēs* and speaks good Greek: but when under the influence of the spirit, she speaks in an unknown tongue like those of the Pythian oracle.

An identical type of glossolalia is referred to in Virgil's *Aeneid* when he writes of the sibyl at Cumae, and something of the same type religious phenomenon is spoken of in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*.

Plato also gives due recognition to this dimension of religious experience in his *Phaedrus*. Not only does Plato describe the state of ecstasy but apparently understands and condones the nature of such experience. He considers the state to be madness as a gift of the gods. For Plato the madness (that is, ecstasy) of the prophets of Pythia at Delphi which produced prophecy was not only superior to divination but above the insights of human sanity (that is, pure reason). Such religious figures were, to Plato, the vocal reproductions of deity who knew not what they spoke. Needless to say, when the prophetic word was spoken, it was often in a language so strange and unusual it needed interpretation.

The mystery religions present a variation on the theme of glossolalia. In the Dionysian mysteries the phenomenon is not unknown. Cultic rites were designed to move the devotee through a series of steps, each pyramiding emotion upon emotion. Frequently worshippers would move into a state of ecstasis and under the impact of the experience speak in a type of language understood only by other initiates. Thus a type of specialized glossolalia was practiced.

Euripides in his work *The Bacchantes* affirms that Bacchus possessed men and that among his worshipers there was a considerable element of prophesying. This occurred only when the full might of the god entered the human frame. Most frequently, the result was a message which foretold the future. We may surmise that such messages were equally as unintelligible as those issuing from the oracles since a drunken stupor was associated with possession by Bacchus.

WESTERN PRACTICES

In a band stretching from the Arctic through Russia, North Asia, and North America, there is another religious figure of formidable power. This is the *shaman* who may be traced through tribal history only to disappear in the mists of most ancient history. The shaman served primarily as a mediator between the realm of spirit and the realm of flesh. By the use of highly individualized rituals the shaman was considered to be capable of either entering the spirit world or bringing spirits into the human realm. Not only did he perform primitive acts of divination, but he delivered messages while in the state of ecstasy. Ordinarily the state of ecstasis was achieved through the use of artificial stimuli.

A shaman uses music as an ecstatic stimulant. He sings and accompanies himself with a tambourine drum. The songs begin quietly and have a plaintive quality, yet the words or syllables used are not akin to a known language. As the ecstatic experience heightens, the shaman changes the tempo and volume of musical sound, both vocal and instrumental. He is encouraged by onlookers, and suddenly from his lips there pours a confusion of sounds, some of an animal quality, others resembling strange foreign tongues. It is the contention of the shaman that while he is in the trance state spirits have spoken through him, and he claims to be unconscious of what he has said or done.

Three other widely scattered manifestations of similar nature should be mentioned. Among the Polynesians of the Pacific there is a religious figure, who for lack of better terminology, we shall call a medium. From time to time these mediums enter a state closely resembling a physical convulsion. While in the state they speak in shrill cries and unknown syllables. They, as well as the people, consider the action to denote possession by the gods and the words as messages from deity.

The two other examples are from ancient Indian and Persia. One of the Vedic deities of India was Soma. It appears that the name derived from a potent drink used in the Vedic ceremonies. This substance, when ingested, caused ecstasy and then visions. In Persian Zoroastrianism there was the use of *haoma*, identical with the Indian *soma*. Apparently the *soma* plant was a mushroom with hallucinogenic properties. Whether one under the influence of the "juice of the *soma*" spoke in unknown language is not known; however, such may have been the case.

CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions may we legitimately draw from these evidences, and what inferences are to be reasonably tolerated?

1. Glossolalia is actually a common religious phenomenon. Throughout history two distinct types of religion are to be observed. First, there is the officially sanctioned religion embraced by priests, scribes, rulers, the court, and the educated classes. Secondly, there is a religion of the rank and file, the masses. On the one hand, we might say, is official orthodoxy and on the other a practical or pragmatic lived-out folk religion. Throughout the world and history, there is to be seen in the second type of religion the ecstatic personality. And among such ecstasies, whether Mesopota-

mian. Egyptian, Israelite, Canaanite, Greek, or Muslim, there were those who, when possessed by the spirit of deity, delivered messages in strange tongues. No religion, ancient or modern, may claim exclusive rights to such a religious act.

2. Glossolalia has been associated with lower social and economic classes for four thousand years and has had full acceptance only in countercultures. It is quite apparent from the sources that the ecstatic incoherent messages of prophetic types in many cultures were a distinguishing characteristic of religious fervor among the lower classes. The Mesopotamians suspected messages from ecstasies. Their validity was dependent upon verification by an official religionist. Among Israelites, ecstasies were associated with the lower classes and were considered to be base or crude men. In these cultures, as well as the Islamic culture, the ecstatic was considered to be on the boundary of orthodox religious experience.

3. For centuries glossolalia has served as a device to denote the presence of deity in an acute personal dimension. There is a strange relationship, both in Mesopotamia and in Israel, between historical event and the rise of ecstaticism. At the time when such personalities arose in Mesopotamia and Israel there was a noticeable shift in religious influence.

Official Mesopotamian religion had become bogged down by the weight of official religion. The mechanics of official state religion had replaced the dimension of personal involvement by the populace. Primary emphasis was placed upon the sanctioned rituals, and priests stood solidly between deity and man. The people knew not if the gods spoke unless informed of such by a religious official following a narrow, rigid, and formal routine.

Israelite religion faced a much different historical situation. A religious vacuum had occurred. The Philistines had overrun the country. The central sanctuary, Shiloh, had been destroyed. Religious and political leadership was practically nonexistent. Into the religious vacuum there arose the ecstatic prophet who affirmed the presence of deity through possession by the spirit.

A somewhat similar illustration is to be found in Islam but is due to a different set of circumstances. The tribal Muslim of the hinterlands of Arabia was cut off from any vital relationship with the official religious centers. The mosque and the minaret were the province of the town and city dweller. They reinforced the concept of the presence of Allah, but what of the Bedouin whose life was filled with the wastelands of the desert? The tribal dervish filled the void and affirmed Allah's presence.

It is not trite to say that in any condition when for any reason, religious man by official act, condition of life, or unique circumstances feels alienated from deity, ecstaticism of one type or another enters the picture.

4. Aids to ecstasy were regularly employed with music and recitation (that is, prayer or repeating of sacred literature or formula) being most frequently referred to in the sources. These same devices are much in evidence in the modern phenomenon of glossolalia. It occasions no wonder as to why the disciples were spoken of in Acts 2:13 as being "filled with new wine." The world of the ancient Near East was accustomed to ecstatic utterance which had been preceded by aids to attain ecstasis. Suffice it to say wine was an aid to ecstasy peculiar to the ancient Near Eastern and Greek religions.