

Of the Various Sorts of Proselytes.

by John Gill

The sermon explores the different types of proselytes in Jewish tradition, their requirements, privileges, and the significance of sincere conversion.

Scripture: Genesis 9:4, Exodus 12:19, Leviticus 19:34, Deuteronomy 10:18, Deuteronomy 14:21, Isaiah 14:1, Matthew 23:15, John 6:44, Acts 2:10, Acts 3:25

Topics: "Proselytes", "Faith and Acceptance"

Description

John Gill discusses the various types of proselytes in the Jewish tradition, emphasizing their different statuses and the conditions under which they were accepted into the Jewish community. He categorizes them into three main types: proselytes of the gate, mercenary proselytes, and proselytes of righteousness, each with distinct obligations and privileges. The sermon highlights the significance of baptism for proselytes of righteousness, who fully embraced the Jewish faith and laws. Gill also reflects on the historical context and the evolving attitudes towards proselytes within the Jewish community. Ultimately, he underscores the importance of sincerity in one's faith journey and the acceptance of those who genuinely seek to follow God's commandments.

Transcript

A Body of PRACTICAL Divinity

Book 5--Chapter 1

A DISSERTATION CONCERNING THE BAPTISM OF JEWISH PROSELYTES OF THE VARIOUS SORTS OF PROSELYTES AMONG THE JEWS

Intending to treat of the admission of proselytes into the Jewish church by baptism, or dipping; it may be proper to consider the different sorts of proselytes among the Jews, and which of them were thus admitted, as is said. The word "proselyte" is originally Greek, and is derived, as Philo[1] observes, apo tou proselhluyenai, "from coming to", that is, from one sect or religion to another, as from heathenism to the Jewish religion; and so Suidas[2] says, proselytes are they oi proselhluyotev, "who come from" the Gentiles, and live according to the laws of God; and such an one is called by the Septuagint interpreters of (Ex. 12:19; Isa. 14:1) and by the Greek writers following them, geiwrav, which is rightly interpreted by Hesychius, such of another nation who are called proselytes to Israel; and which word comes near to the Hebrew word rg and nearer still to the Chaldee word arwyg used for a proselyte; and is, by Eusebius,

interpreted epimiktouv[3], such as were mixed with Israelites.

There were two sorts of proselytes with the Jews, some say three; a proselyte of the gate; a mercenary proselyte; and a proselyte of righteousness; the first and last are most usually observed. 1. First, One sort was called rev rg "a proselyte of the gate"; and in scripture, "the stranger that is in thy gates", (Deut. 14:21, 24:14) being a sojourner, and permitted to dwell there; hence such an one had also the name of bwvt rg "a proselyte inhabitant"; (see Ex. 12:15; Lev. 25:45, 47) one who was allowed to dwell among the Jews on certain conditions; and is generally distinguished from another sort, called a "proselyte of righteousness", of whom more hereafter.

Though the Jews, not always consistent with themselves, and so not in this matter, sometimes interpret "the stranger in the gate", of a proselyte inhabitant, or a proselyte by inhabitation, and sometimes of a proselyte of righteousness. So Nachmanides[4], having explained the stranger in the gate of a proselyte inhabitant, or one who obliged himself to keep the seven precepts of Noah, according to the usual interpretation of it, observes; "Our doctors interpret it differently, for they say, 'thy stranger within thy gate', simply denotes, a 'proselyte of righteousness'."

So that according to them, such a stranger may be taken both for the one and for the other, in different respects; but commonly the proselyte inhabitant is only understood; who in general was obliged to promise, that he would not be guilty of idolatry, or worship any idol[5]; this he was to promise before three witnesses, for it is asked, "who is Ger Toshab; that is, a proselyte allowed to dwell in Israel? (the answer is) Whoever takes upon him, in the presence of three neighbours, that he will not commit idolatry."

It follows, "R. Meir, and the wise men say, whoever takes upon him the seven precepts which the sons of Noah obliged themselves to observe." Others say, "these do not come into the general rule of such a proselyte. Who then is one? He is a proselyte who eats what dies of itself; (or) who takes upon him to keep all the commandments in the law, except that which forbids the eating of things which die of themselves[6];" but the usual account of such a proselyte is, that he agrees to observe the seven precepts enjoined the sons of Noah[7]; six of which were given to Adam, the first man, and the seventh was added to them, and given to Noah, and are as follow[8]: a.

Concerning idolatry; by this a son of Noah was forbid to worship the sun, moon, and stars, and images of any sort; nor might he erect a statue, nor plant a grove, nor make any image. b. Concerning blaspheming the name of God. Such an one might not blaspheme, neither the proper name of God, Jehovah; nor any of his surnames, titles, and epithets. c. Concerning shedding of blood, or murder, the breach of which command he was guilty of, if he slew one, though an embryo in his mother's womb; and one who pursued another, when he could have escaped from him with the loss of one of his members, &c. d.

Concerning uncleanness, or impure copulations; of which there were six sorts forbidden a son of Noah; as, with an own mother, with a father's wife (or stepmother), with another man's wife, with his sister by the mother's side, with a male, or with mankind, and with a beast. e. Concerning rapine, or robbery and theft; of which such were guilty, whether they robbed a Gentile or an Israelite, or stole money, or men, or suppressed the wages of an hireling; and the like. f. Concerning the member of a living creature, taken from it while alive, and eating it: this is the command, it is said, which was to Noah, and his sons, and of which the Jews interpret Genesis 9:4. g.

Concerning judgments or punishments to be inflicted on those who broke the above laws: this command obliged them to regard the directions, judgment, and sentence of the judges appointed to see the said

laws put into execution, and to punish delinquents. Now such Gentiles, who laid themselves under obligation to observe these commands, had leave to dwell among the Israelites, though not in everyone of their cities; not in Jerusalem particularly[9]; wherefore those devout men and proselytes said to dwell in Jerusalem, (Acts 2:5, 10) were not proselytes of the gate, but proselytes of righteousness.

Nor are such sort of proselytes now received, only while the Jews lived in their own land, and were not under the jurisdiction of another people; or as they express it, while jubilees were in use and observed[10]. This sort of proselytes, though they did not enjoy the privileges the proselytes of righteousness did, yet some they had; they might worship and pray in the court of the Gentiles, though not in the temple; they might offer burnt offerings, though not other sacrifices; their poor were fed with the poor of Israel, their sick were visited by Israelites, and their dead were buried with them[11].

Such proselytes as these, as they were not obliged to circumcision, nor to other commands peculiar to the Jews; none but those before observed; so neither were they baptized, or dipped, when made proselytes, which is said of others. Maimonides[12] affirms of such a proselyte, that he is neither circumcised nor dipped. Bishop Kidder[13] is therefore mistaken in saying, that proselytes of the gate were baptized, but not circumcised. 2. Secondly, there was another sort of proselytes, which are taken notice of, at least, by some as such; who were called Myrkv "mercenary" ones, and are reckoned as between proselytes of the gate and Gentiles.

In Exodus 12:44, 45, a mercenary, or "hired servant", is distinguished from a servant bought with money; he being hired only for a certain time, as for six years; and also from a foreigner, a stranger in the gate, a proselyte of the gate; and both of them are distinguished from the servant bought with money, who was circumcised, and might eat of the passover, when neither of the other might, being both uncircumcised; and therefore R. Levi Barzelonita[14] is thought to be mistaken when he says, "a mercenary is a proselyte, who is circumcised, but not dipped; for so the wise men explain it:" but if a stranger or proselyte of the gate was not circumcised, much less a mercenary, who was far below him; besides, if he was circumcised, he might eat of the passover; which is denied him: and so Ben Melech observes[15] of these two, the foreigner and the hired servant; they are Gentiles, and uncircumcised: and Abendana, in his notes upon him, from the Rabbins, says, the former is a proselyte inhabitant, or a proselyte of the gate, who takes upon him the seven precepts of the sons of Noah; the latter is a servant whose body is not possessed, that is, is not in the possession of his master, not being bought with his money, is only an hired servant, and so not circumcised.

But perhaps Jarchi's note will reconcile this to what Barzelonita says; "Toshab, a foreigner, this is a proselyte inhabitant; and Shacir, or hired servant, this is a Gentile;" but what is the meaning? are they not uncircumcised? (that is, both of them) and it is said, "No uncircumcised person shall eat thereof": but they are as a circumcised Arabian, and a circumcised Gabnunite, or Gabonite[16], though circumcised yet not by Israelites, but by Gentiles, which gave no right to the passover.

Hottinger[17] thinks these mercenary proselytes, and with him Leusden[18] seems to agree, were mechanic strangers, who left their own country, and came among the Jews for the sake of learning some mechanic art; and who, conforming to certain laws and conditions, prescribed by the Jews, were permitted to sojourn with them until they had learnt the art. There are but few writers who speak of this sort of proselytes. However, it seems agreed on all hands, that whether circumcised or not, they were not baptized, or dipped. 3.

Thirdly, There was another sort of proselyte, called qdu rg a "proselyte of righteousness"[19] (see Deut. 16:20) a stranger circumcised, and who is so called when he is circumcised; and sometimes tyrb Nb rg "a proselyte, the son of the covenant"[20], the same as an Israelite (see Acts 3:25). This sort of proselytes were the highest, and had in greatest esteem; who not only submitted to circumcision, but embraced all the laws, religion, and worship of the Jews; and were in all respects as they, and enjoyed equally all privileges and immunities, civil and religious, as they did; except being made a king, though one might if his mother was of Israel[21]; and being members of the great Sanhedrim, yet might be of the lesser, provided they were born of an Israelitish woman[22]; nay, even such have been in the great Sanhedrim, as Shemaiah and Abtalion, who were of the posterity of Sennacherib[23]; but their mothers being Israelites, it was lawful for them to judge, that is, in the great Sanhedrim; for one was the prince, and the other the father of that court[24].

So the Jews say[25], the posterity of Jethro sat in Lishcat Gazith, that is, in the great Sanhedrim, which sat in that room; and for which they quote 1 Chronicles 2:55) yet it has been a question, whether a proselyte should be made a public minister, or president of the congregation, called rwbu xylv; but the common opinion was, that he might be one[26]: of this sort of proselytes, of whom they boast, some were persons of note for learning, or wealth, or worldly grandeur[27]; but without sufficient ground.

Some, they own, were not sincere who became proselytes, either through fear, or to gratify some sensual lust, or for some sinister end or another. Some were called "proselytes of lions"[28], who became so through fear; as the Samaritans, because of the lions sent among them, and that they might be freed from them, embraced the worship of God, though they retained also the worship of their idols. Others were called "proselytes of dreams"; who were directed and encouraged to become proselytes by such who pretended to skill in dreams, as being omens of good things to them.

Though some, in the place referred to, instead of twmlx "dreams", read "windows", and render the words "proselytes of windows", so Alting[29], meaning the windows of their eyes, who, to gratify the lust of the eyes, became proselytes; as Shechem, being taken with the sight of Dinah, submitted to circumcision for the sake of her; and others were called "proselytes of Mordecai and Esther", who were like those who became Jews in their times, (Esther 8:17) through fear of the Jews, as there expressed.

Others were true and sincere proselytes, who cordially embraced the Jewish religion, and from the heart submitted to the laws and rules of it; these were called Myrwrg Myrb "drawn proselytes"[30], who were moved of themselves, and of their own good will, without any sinister bias, and out of real love and affection to the Jewish religion, embraced it. Compare the phrase with John 6:44. And such, they say[31], all proselytes will be in the time to come, or in the days of the Messiah; and yet sometimes they say, that then none will be received[32]: and when persons propose to be proselytes, the Jews are very careful to ask many questions, in order to try whether they are sincere or not; and such as they take to be sincere they speak very highly of; they say[33], "Greater are the proselytes at this time, than the Israelites when they stood on mount Sinai; because they saw the lightning, heard the thunder, and the sound of the trumpet; but these saw and heard none of these things, and yet have taken upon them the yoke of the kingdom, and are come under the wings of the Shechinah" though elsewhere, and in common, they speak but slightly of them, and say; "They are as grievous to Israel as a scab in the skin, or as a razor to it[34], because they often turn back again, and seduce the Israelites, and carry them off with them; yea, they say they stop the coming of the Messiah[35]."

However, they have a saying[36] which shows some regard to them; "A proselyte, even to the tenth generation, do not despise a Syrian, or an heathen before him, he being present, or to his face; because till that time their minds are supposed to incline towards their own people;" and so it is said[37], the daughter of a proselyte may not be married to a priest, unless her mother is an Israelitess, even unto the tenth generation. And there is another saying[38] of theirs, Do not trust a proselyte until the twenty fourth generation, that is, never; not only priests, Levites, and Israelites, but even bastards, and the Nethinim, or Gibeonites, were preferred to proselytes[39].

Some of these sayings do not seem so well to agree with the words of Christ, (Matthew 23:15) to reconcile which, it is thought[40], that while the temple was standing, the desire of making proselytes was stronger than after it was destroyed by the Romans; resenting that, they became indifferent about making proselytes, and were unconcerned about the salvation of the Gentiles, and contented themselves with receiving such only who freely came over to them. It never was deemed so honourable to be the descendants of proselytes, as of original Hebrews.

Hence the apostle Paul gloried that he was an Hebrew of the Hebrews, both his parents being Hebrews. A Rabbi of note among the Jews, whose parents were both proselytes, or Gentiles, is called not by his proper name, Jochanan, but Ben Bag-Bag; that is, the son of a Gentile man, and the son of a Gentile woman; and for the same reason he is called in a following paragraph, Ben He-He, numerically He being the same with Bag; though it is said, these abbreviations were used from reverence to him, and a regard for him[41]; and, indeed, the Jews were not to reproach and upbraid proselytes with what they and their ancestors had been, or had done; they were not to say to a proselyte, Remember thy former works; nor were they to say to the sons of proselytes, Remember the works of your fathers[42]; for this is the affliction and oppression of them, as they understand it, they are cautioned against, (Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:33) nay, they were to love them as themselves, because the Lord God loved the stranger, (Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:18) for of proselytes of righteousness they interpret these passages[43].

Now it is of this sort of proselytes, proselytes of righteousness, that it is said, they were admitted into covenant, and into the Jewish church, as the Israelites were; the males by circumcision, by tlybj "baptism", or dipping, and by sacrifice; and the females by baptism, or dipping, and by sacrifice; and it is the baptism or dipping of these proselytes, that will be inquired into, and be the subject of the following Dissertation.
ENDNOTES:

[1] Deut. Monarchia, l. 1. p. 818.

[2] In voce proselutoi.

[3] Eccl. Hist. l. 1. c. 7.

[4] Apud Frischmuth. Dissert. de 7. Noach. Praecept. s. 20, 21.

[5] R. Nathan, Sepher Aruch, R. D. Kimchi, Sepher Shorash. & Elias Levita, Sepher Tishbi in voce rwg.

[6] T. Bab. Avodah Zarah, fol. 64. 2.

[7] Philip. Aquinat. Maaric in voce rwg.

[8] Maimon. Hilchot Melacim, c. 9. s. 1. &c.

- [9] Maimon. Hilchot Beth Habechirah, c. 7. s. 14.
- [10] T. Bab. Eracin, fol. 29. 1. Maimon. Obede Cochabim, c. 10. s. 6. Milah, c. 1. s. 6.
- [11] Maimon. Melacim, c. 10. s. 12.
- [12] Isure Biab, c. 14. s. 7.
- [13] Demonstration of the Messiah, part 2. p. 176.
- [14] Chinnuch, p. 17.
- [15] Miclol Yophi in loc.
- [16] Vid. T. Bab. Avodah Zarah, c. 2. fol. 27. 1. & Edzard. not. in ib. p. 292.
- [17] Thesaur. Philolog. l. 1. p. 18.
- [18] Philolog. Heb. Mixt. Dissert. 21. vid. Carpzov. not. ad Schickard. Jus Regium, p. 323.
- [19] Zohar in Ex.od. fol. 36. 1. & in Num. fol. 69. 4.
- [20] R. Levi Ben Gersom, in Ex.od. xxii. 21. fol. 95. 2.
- [21] Maimon. Melacim. c. 1. s. 4.
- [22] Ibid. Sanhedrin, c. 2. s. 1. 9.
- [23] T. Bab. Sanhedrin, fol. 96. 2.
- [24] Juchasin, fol. 17. 2. & 18. 1.
- [25] T. Bab. Sanhedrin, fol. 104. 1. & 106. 1. & Sotah, fol. 11. 1.
- [26] Vid. Vitringam de Synagoga vet. par. 2. l. 3. c. 6. p. 943.
- [27] As Aristotle, Meor Enayim, c. 22. fol. 91. 2. Izates and Monbaz, the sons of queen Helena, both kings, ibid. c. 51. fol. 161. 2. & c. 52. fol. 164. 2. 166, 167. Tzemach David, par. 1. fol. 26. 1. & par. 2. fol. 15. 2. Nebuzaradan, the general of Nebuchadnezzar, T. Bab. Sanhedrin, fol. 96. 2. Antoninus Pius, the Roman emperor, T. Hieros. Megillah, fol. 72. 1. & 74. 1. Ketiah, a prince in Caesar's court, Avodah Zarah, fol. 10. 2. Juchasin, fol. 66. 2. Nero, a general of Caesar's army, from whom sprung R. Meir, T. Bab. Gittin, fol. 56. 1. Juchasin, fol. 41. 1. & 63. 2. Tzemach David, par. 2. fol. 16. 1, 2. Of the circumcision of these the Jews speak, but say nothing of their baptism.
- [28] R. Nehemiah in T. Bab. Yebamot, fol. 24. 2.
- [29] Heptas Dissertat. par. 2. Diss. 7. de Proselytis, s. 20.
- [30] T. Bab. Avodah Zarah, fol. 3. 2.
- [31] Ibid. fol. 34. 1.
- [32] Zohar in Gen. fol. 33. 1. & 40. 2.

- [33] Medrash. apud Buxtorf. Lexic. Talmud. Col. 411.
- [34] T. Bab. Yebamot, fol. 47. 2. & 109. 2. Kiddushin, fol. 70. 2.
- [35] Niddah, fol. 13. 2.
- [36] T. Bab. Sanhedrin, fol. 94. 1. Jarchi in Ex.od. xviii. 9.
- [37] Misnah Bicchurim, c. 1. s. 5.
- [38] Yalkut in Ruth, fol. 163. 4.
- [39] T. Hieros. Horaiot, fol. 48. 2.
- [40] Vid. Wagenseil. not. in Sotah, p. 754.
- [41] Pirke Abot, c. 5. s. 22, 23. Vid. Fagium & Leusden. in ibid.
- [42] Vid. R. David Kimchi, Sepher Shorash. rad. hny.
- [43] R. Levi Ben. Gersom, in Lev. xiv. 33, 34. fol. 163. 3. Ez Hechayim M. S. apud Wagenseil, not. in Sotah, p. 205.

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