

# The Occasion of the Dissertation.

by John Gill

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*The sermon discusses the historical practice of Jewish baptism and its potential connection to Christian baptism, with a focus on the argument that Jewish baptism is the origin of Christian baptism.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 3:5

**Topics:** "Baptism", "Jewish Traditions"

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## Description

John Gill discusses the historical context of baptism among the Jews, asserting that the practice of baptizing proselytes, including infants, predates John the Baptist and Jesus. He references several learned scholars who support the idea that baptism was a well-known rite of initiation within Jewish tradition, which explains the lack of explicit mention of infant baptism in the New Testament. Gill emphasizes that this Jewish custom served as a foundation for the Christian practice of baptism, suggesting that it was not a new concept but rather a continuation of an existing tradition. He argues that understanding this background is crucial for comprehending the significance of baptism in Christianity. The sermon ultimately seeks to validate the practice of infant baptism by linking it to Jewish customs.

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## Transcript

A Body of PRACTICAL Divinity

Book 5--Chapter 2

### THE OCCASION OF THIS DISSERTATION

Several learned men, and some of our own nation, whom I shall chiefly take notice of, have asserted, that it was a custom or rite used by the Jews before the times of John the Baptist, Christ, and his apostles, to receive proselytes into their church by baptism, or dipping, as well as by circumcision; and these both adult and infants; and that John and Christ took up the rite of baptizing from thence, and practised, and directed to the practice of it, as they found it; and which, they think, accounts for the silence about infant baptism in the New Testament, it being no new nor strange practice.

The writers among us of most note, who make mention of it are, Broughton, Ainsworth, Selden, Hammond, and Lightfoot; men justly esteemed for their learning and knowledge in Jewish affairs. Mr. Hugh Broughton is the first of our nation I have met with who speaks of it. He says[1], "The Babylonian Talmud, and Rambam (Maimonides) record, that in the days of David and Solomon, when many

thousands of heathens became proselytes, they were admitted only by baptism, without circumcision.

So now, when the New Testament was to be made for the many, that is, for all nations, baptism was not strange; neither is John an astonishment for that; but demanded whether he be Elijah or Christ, or that special prophet named in Deuteronomy." A little after he observes, that "Christ from baptism used of them (the Jews) 'without commandment, and of small authority', authorizes a seal of entering into the rest of Christ, using the Jews' 'weakness' as an allurements thither." Where, by the way, he makes this usage to be "without commandment", that is, of God, and to be but of "small authority", even from men, and a piece of "weakness" of the Jews, and yet authorized by Christ; which seems incredible.

Mr. Henry Ainsworth is the next I shall mention, who takes notice of this custom. His words are[2], "That we may the better know how they (the Jews) were wont to receive heathens into the church of Israel; I will note it from the Hebrew doctors:" and then gives a large quotation from Maimonides; the substance of which is, that as by three things Israel entered into the covenant, by circumcision, and baptism, and sacrifice; in like manner heathen proselytes were admitted; on which he makes this remark: "Whereupon baptism was nothing strange unto the Jews when John the Baptist began his ministry, (Matthew 3:5, 6) they made a question of his person that did it, but not of the thing itself, (John 1:25)."

Dr. Hammond, another learned man, speaks of this same custom or rite with the Jews: he says[3], that "proselytes born of heathen parents, and become proselytes of justice, were admitted by the Jews, not only by circumcision, (and while the temple stood) by sacrifice; but also with the ceremony or solemnity of washing, that is, ablution of the whole body, done solemnly in a river, or other such great place or receptacle of water." So he says, Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, was made a proselyte in this way; and that this ceremony of initiation belonged not only to those, which being of years, came over from heathenism to the Jews' religion, but also to their children infants, if their parents, or the consessus (the sanhedrim) under which they were, did in the behalf of their children desire it; and on condition that the children, when they came to age, should not renounce the Jewish religion; nay, he says, the native Jews themselves were thus baptized; for all which he refers to the Talmud, Tr.

Repud. by which I suppose he means the tract Gittin, concerning divorces. But I have not met with anything relating thereunto in that treatise. For the same purposes it is quoted by Dr. Wall, who, I suppose, goes upon the authority of Dr. Hammond, since he acknowledges he was not so well acquainted with the books to be searched for such quotations. Now Dr. Hammond observes, that "having said thus much of the custom among the Jews, it is now most easy to apply it to the practice of John, and after of Christ, 'who certainly took this ceremony from them';" and further observes, that by this it appears, how little needful it will be to defend the baptism of Christian infants from the law of circumcising the infants among the Jews; "the foundation being far more fitly laid" in that other of Jewish baptism.

Yea, in another of his works he suggests that this custom is the "true basis of infant baptism"[4]. The very learned Mr. Selden is more large in his quotations in various parts of his works[5], from both Talmuds and other Jewish writers, concerning this rite and custom; which authorities produced by him, and others, will be given and considered hereafter. At the close of which he makes these remarks[6]; that the Jewish baptism was as it were a "transition" into Christianity, or however, a shadow of a transition, not to be passed over in silence; and that it should be adverted to, that the rite or sacrament of baptism, used at the beginning of Christianity, and of the gospel by John, and by the apostles, was not introduced as a "new action", and as not before heard of, "even as a religious action", but as well known to the Hebrews, as a rite of initiation, from the use and discipline of their ancestors, and as joined with circumcision.

Dr. Lightfoot, who must be allowed to be well versed in Jewish literature, has produced the same authorities Selden has, if not more, in support of the said rite or custom, as in early use with the Jews, and exults and triumphs abundantly over the Antipaedobaptists in favour of infant baptism, on account thereof: he asserts, that "baptism had been 'in long and common use' among them (the Jews) many generations before John the Baptist came; they using this for admission of proselytes into the church, and baptizing men, women, and children for that end:--hence a ready reason may be given why there is 'so little mention' (no mention at all) of baptizing infants in the New Testament; and that there is neither 'plain precept' nor 'example' for it, as some ordinarily plead; the reason is, because there needed none, baptizing infants having been as 'ordinarily used' in the church of the Jews, as ever it hath been in the Christian church: --that baptism was no strange thing when John came baptizing; but the rite was known so well by everyone, that nothing was better known what baptism was, and therefore there needed not such punctual and exact rules about the manner and object of it, as there had needed, if it had never been seen before: --that Christ took up baptism as it was 'in common and known use', and 'in ordinary and familiar practice' among that nation; and therefore gave no rules for the manner of baptizing, nor for the age and sex of persons to be baptized, which was well enough known already, and needed no 'rule' to be prescribed: --observing how very known and frequent the use of baptism was among the Jews, the reason appears very easy, why the Sanhedrim, by their messengers, inquired not of John, concerning the reason of baptism, but concerning the authority of the baptizer; not what baptism meant; but whence he had a licence so to baptize (John 1:25).

Hence also the reason appears why the New Testament does not 'prescribe', by some more 'accurate rule', who the persons are to be baptized: --the whole nation knew well enough that little children used to be baptized; there was no need for a precept for that, which had ever by common use prevailed[7]." Dr. Wall, upon these authorities, has thought fit to premise an account of this Jewish baptism, to his history of infant baptism, as serving greatly the cause of it, and as throwing light upon the words of Christ and his apostles, concerning it, and the primitive practice of it; and, animated by such authorities, every puny writer, who does not know his right hand from his left in this matter, takes it up, and swaggers with it.

And, indeed, scarce any will now venture in the defence of infant baptism without it. This is the last refuge and dernier resort of the Paedobaptists; and, indeed, a learned baronet[8] of our nation says, he knows not of any stronger argument in proof of infant baptism than this is. Now since so great a stress is laid upon it, and it is made a matter of such great importance, as to be a "transition" into Christianity, and to be "closely connected" with Christian baptism; that from whence it is taken, and is the "rule" to direct how to proceed, both with respect to the manner and objects of it; yea, is the "basis and foundation" of infant baptism, and the "strongest argument" in proof of it; and which makes other arguments, heretofore thought of great weight, now "unnecessary": it is highly proper to inquire what proof can be given of such a rite and custom being in use among the Jews, before the times of John Baptist, Christ, and his apostles; and if so, what force and influence such a custom can and ought to have on the faith and practice of Christians. The proof of which will next be considered. ENDNOTES:

[1] Works, p. 201, 203.

[2] Annotat. on Gen. xvii. 12.

[3] Annotat. in Matt. iii. 1.

[4] Six Queries, p. 191, 195.

[5] De Success. ad Leg. Ebr. c. 26. de Jure Natur. et Gent. l. 2. c. 2.

[6] De Synedriis, l. 1. c. 2. p. 27, 31.

[7] Lightfoot's Works, vol. 1. Harmony and Chronicle of the New Testament, p. 9, 10, 17. Harmony of the Four Evangelists, part 1. p. 465, 466. part 2. p. 526, 527. and part 3. p. 583, 584. Vol. 2. Hor. Heb. in Matt. iii. 6.

[8] Sir Richard Ellys, Fortuita Sacra, p. 67.

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