

# The Proof of This Custom Only From the Talmuds.

by John Gill

---

*The sermon explores the origins and implications of the Jewish practice of receiving proselytes through baptism as documented in the Talmuds.*

**Scripture:** Exodus 19:10, Exodus 24:8, Leviticus 14:7, Numbers 15:15, Numbers 19:19

**Topics:** "Baptism", "Jewish Customs"

---

## Description

John Gill discusses the origins and evidence of the Jewish custom of receiving proselytes through baptism or dipping, emphasizing that this practice is primarily documented in the Talmuds, particularly the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. He notes the lack of earlier references to this rite and critiques the scriptural justifications provided by Jewish scholars, arguing that they are insufficient and not divinely mandated. Gill concludes that the custom of proselyte baptism lacks a solid foundation in scripture and should not be seen as a precursor to Christian baptism, which he believes was established by John the Baptist, Christ, and the apostles.

---

## Transcript

A Body of PRACTICAL Divinity

Book 5--Chapter 4

### THE PROOF OF THIS CUSTOM ONLY FROM THE TALMUDS AND TALMUDICAL WRITERS

Seeing the rite of receiving proselytes by baptism, or dipping among the Jews, is nowhere mentioned in any writings before the times of John and Christ, nor in any after, nearer than the third and fourth centuries; it is next to be inquired, when and where we first hear of it; and upon inquiry it will be found, that the first mention of it, for ought as yet appears, is in the Jewish Talmuds. The testimonies from thence concerning it, and the whole evidence, as there given of it, will now be laid before the reader.

There are two Talmuds, the one called Jerusalem, the other Babylonian; the one written for the Jews at Jerusalem, and in Judaea, after the destruction of the city and temple, and in the Jerusalem dialect. The other for the use of the Jews in Babylon, and in those parts, and in their style. The former is the most ancient, and therefore I shall begin with it, being finished, as generally supposed, in the year 230; but if the

Misnah was not compiled till the year 220, being one hundred and fifty from the destruction of Jerusalem, there must be a longer space of time than that of ten years between the one and the other.

David Nieto, lately belonging to a Jewish synagogue here in London, says[1], the Jerusalem Talmud was written near a hundred years after the Misnah; but other Jews make it later still, and make a difference of two hundred and thirty three years between the finishing of the one and the other; the one being finished in 189, and the other in 422[2], which is much more probable; and so this Talmud was not earlier than the beginning of the fifth century; nay, sometimes they place it in the year 469, the latter end of that century[3].

Scaliger places[4] it in the year 370. Mr. Whiston[5] in 369. And so Elias Levita[6] writes, that R. Jochanan compiled it three hundred years after the destruction of Jerusalem; but Morinus[7] will have it to be after the year 600, which is carrying it down too low. The passages I have met with in it any way relating to the case under consideration; for it will be allowed there are some; and therefore it will be owned, that Mr. Rees[8] was mistaken in saying it was not pretended to be found in it.

The passages are as follow. In one place[9], a certain Rabbi is represented as saying to another, "Wait, and we will 'dip' this proselytess tomorrow. R. Zera asked R. Isaac Bar Nachman, Wherefore? because of the glory of that old man, or because they do not dip a proselyte in the night. He replied to him, Why do not they dip a proselyte in the night? Abda came before R. Jose (and said), What is the meaning then of not dipping a proselyte in the night?" And a little after, in the same column, a saying of R.

Hezekiah is reported; "A man finds an infant cast out (an exposed infant), and he dips it in the name of a servant;" or for a servant, on account of servitude; but then dipping for servitude, and dipping for proselytism, were two different things with the Jews, as before observed; and yet this is the only clause produced by Dr. Lightfoot out of this Talmud, for the above purpose; or by any other that I have seen. However, there are others which speak of the dipping of adult proselytes; which became a matter of controversy.

In another treatise, in the same Talmud[10], mention is made of a proselyte circumcised, but not dipped; (and it is added) all goes after circumcision; that is, that denominates a proselyte. "R. Joshua says, yea, dipping stays (or retards) it; and Bar Kaphra teaches, that he who is not dipped, this is right (a true proselyte); for there is no proselyte but dips for accidents;" that is, for accidental and nocturnal pollutions; and it seems such a dipping sufficed for proselytism.

Of so little account did these Rabbins make of dipping for proselytism, who first mention it, not only make it insignificant, but as a delay of it, and what was an obstruction and hindrance of it: and further on it is said[11], "A proselytess less than three years of age and one day, she has not knowledge for dipping (or when she is dipped); and afterwards returns and is dipped for the name of the Holy One of Israel; every one is a proselytess, and she is a proselytess." This looks like Anabaptism, or rebaptization for want of knowledge when first dipped.

And a little further still[12], "A stranger or a proselyte who has children, and says, I am circumcised, but I am not dipped; he is to be believed, and they dip him on the Sabbath." In another treatise[13], a mention is made of a proselyte who dipped after the illumination of the East, that is, after sunrising. These are all the places I have met with in the Jerusalem Talmud any way relating to this custom. Dr. Wall[14] refers to two or three other passages in this Talmud, through mistake for the Babylonian Talmud; in which he may be excused, because, as he himself says, he was not well acquainted with these books; but he cannot be excused of inadvertency in transcribing from his authors, unless they have led him wrong.

The Babylonian Talmud is next to be considered; from whence testimonies may be brought relating to the custom under consideration. This Talmud was finished, as is usually said, about A. D. 500; according to the account of the Jews it was finished three hundred and sixteen years after the Misnah, and eighty three after the Jerusalem Talmud[15]. Though Morinus thinks it did not appear until the seventh or eighth century. According to the Jewish doctors, as related in this Talmud, the Israelites, and the proselytes, were admitted into covenant in the same way and manner; and which they conclude from Numbers 15:15, "As ye are, so shall the stranger be, before the Lord": on which they thus descant[16]: "As your fathers entered not into covenant but by circumcision and dipping, and acceptance of blood or sacrifice; so they (the proselytes) enter not into covenant, but by circumcision, and dipping, and through acceptance of blood," or sprinkling of blood, as the Gloss is; or by sacrifice, as it is sometimes expressed, which is favourably accepted of God; and without both circumcision and dipping, none were reckoned proper proselytes; this is said two or three times in one leaf[17]; "A man is not a proselyte unless both circumcised and dipped."

R. Chiyah Bar Abba went to Gabla, it is said, and he saw the daughters of Israel pregnant by proselytes, who were circumcised but not dipped; he went and told R. Jochanan, who declared their issue bastards, and not children of the law, or legitimate: about this a controversy was raised, related in the same place; "A stranger that is circumcised and not dipped, R. Eliezer says, lo, this is a proselyte; for so we find by our fathers, that they were circumcised, but not dipped; one that is dipped, and not circumcised, R.

Joshua says, lo, this is a proselyte; for so we find by our mothers (not maids, or maidservants, as Dr. Lightfoot[18] translates it) that they were dipped and not circumcised." Had the account stopped here, the decision must have been against dipping: for it is a rule with the Jews, that when R. Eliezer and R. Joshua dissent, the decision is according to R. Eliezer[19], whom they often call Eliezer the Great[20], and say many extravagant things of him; particularly, that if all the wise men of Israel were put into one scale, and Eliezer the son of Hyrcanus, into the other, he would weigh them all down[21]; yet here the wise men interpose, and say, "He that is dipped and not circumcised, circumcised and not dipped, is no proselyte, until he is both circumcised and dipped; for R.

Joshua may learn from the fathers, and R. Eliezer from the mothers." And so in this way they reconciled both; but R. Eliezer continued in the same sentiments, which he afterwards declared for, and affirms, that a proselyte that is circumcised, and not dipped, awh aylem rg "he is an honourable proselyte"[22]; so that according to him, dipping was not necessary to one's being a proselyte; and R. Barzelonita[23] says, of a sort of proselytes which have been taken notice of, he is a proselyte who is circumcised and not dipped.

So that the Jews are not agreed among themselves about this point. The manner of receiving a proselyte, and dipping him, when circumcised and healed of his wound, and of the dipping of women also, is related in the same treatise of the Babylonian Talmud[24]; "A stranger when he comes to be made proselyte, "at this time", they say unto him, What dost thou see, to become a proselyte? dost thou not know that the Israelites "at this time" are in distress, and in sorrowful circumstances, driven about and scattered, and are reproached, and chastisements come upon them?

If he says, I know this, and I am not worthy (to be joined with them), they receive him immediately; and make known unto him some of the light, and some of the heavy commands (the particulars of which follow); if he receives them, they immediately circumcise him; and if there be anything remains, which hinders circumcision, they return and circumcise him a second time, and when he is healed, they dip him immediately, and two disciples of the wise men stand by him, and make known to him some of the light and some of the heavy commands; then he dips, and goes up, and he is an Israelite.

If a woman, the women set her in water up to her neck, and two disciples of the wise men stand by her without, and make known some of the light and some of the heavy commands." Maimonides[25] adds, "After that she 'dips' herself before them, and they turn away their faces, and go out, so that they do not see her when 'she goes up out of the water'." Of a woman big with child when she is dipped they have this rule[26], "A stranger pregnant, who is made a proselytess, her child has no need of dipping, that is, for proselytism, as the Gloss; is because sufficient for it is the dipping of its mother; and a woman that is dipped as unclean, according to the doctors, that is sufficient to make her a proselytess."

Says R. Chiyah Bar Ame, "I will dip this heathen woman, in the name or on account of a woman;" that is, as the Gloss is, for the dipping of uncleanness, she being a menstruous woman, and not for the dipping of proselytism. Says R. Joseph, "I will make it right;" that is, pronounce that she is a perfect proselytess; for though she is not dipped for proselytism, yet being dipped for uncleanness, it serves for proselytism; for a stranger or a heathen is not dipped for uncleanness[27].

There are various circumstances observed in the same treatise concerning the dipping of proselytes; as the place where they are dipped; "In a place it is said[28], where a menstruous woman dips, there a proselyte and a freed servant dip;" that is, as the Gloss is, in a quantity of forty seahs of water: the time of its being done is also signified; as that they do not dip in the night; and it is disputed whether it should be done on the Sabbath day: three witnesses also were required to be present; and where there are three, he (the proselyte) "dips" and goes up, and lo, he is as an Israelite[29].

It is said[30], "It happened in the house of R. Chiya Bar Rabbi, where were present R. Oschaia Bar Rabbi, and R. Oschaia Bar Chiya, that there came a proselyte before him who was circumcised, but not dipped; he said unto him, Wait here till tomorrow, and we will dip thee. Three things are to be learnt from hence. 1. That three persons are required (at the dipping of a proselyte). 2. That he is not a proselyte unless he is circumcised and dipped. 3. That they do not dip a proselyte in the night;" to which may be added, 4.

That they must be three Rabbins who are promoted, that is, are famous and eminent ones, who are witnesses, as it seems these three were. There is but one instance in this Talmud, that I have met with, of the dipping of a child or a minor, made a proselyte; and a male is so called until he is thirteen years of age and one day; of such an one it is said[31], "A proselyte, a little one (a minor), they dip him by the decree of the Sanhedrim;" that is, as the Gloss is, one that has no father, and his mother brings him to the Sanhedrim, to be made a proselyte, and there are three at his dipping; and they are a father to him, and by their means he is made a proselyte.

And in the same place it is observed of a stranger, whose sons and daughters are made proselytes with him, and acquiesce in what their father has done, when they are grown up, they may make it void. There is another instance of the dipping of a minor; but not for proselytism, but for eating the Trumah, or the oblation of the fruits of the earth. So a certain one says[32], "I remember when I was a child, and was carried on my father's shoulders, that they took me from school, and stripped me of my coat, and dipped me, that I might eat of the Trumah in the evening;" but this was not a proselyte, but an Israelite, the son of a priest, who, it seems, was not qualified to eat of the oblation without dipping.

This was one of their various baptisms, or dippings. This now is the whole compass of the evidence from the Talmuds for the rite of admitting proselytes among the Jews by baptism, or dipping. I have not omitted anything relating to it in them that has fallen under my observation. As for the quotations usually made from Maimonides, who lived in the twelfth century, in proof of this custom; whatever may be said for him

as an industrious and judicious compiler of things, out of the Talmud, which he has expressed in purer language, and digested in better order; he cannot be thought to be of greater and higher authority than those writings from whence he has derived them; for his work is only a stream from the Talmudic fountain.

And as for later writers; as the authors of Lebush, Schulchan Aruch, and others, they derive from him. So that the Talmuds appear to be the spring and source of what is said of this custom, and from whence the proof and evidence of it is to be fetched; but whether the reasonings, decisions, and determinations therein concerning it, can be judged a sufficient proof of it, without better testimonies, especially from the scriptures, deserves consideration. It must not be concealed, that it is pretended there is proof of it from scripture; which I shall attend unto.

The proof of the Jewish fathers entering into covenant by baptism, or dipping, is fetched from Exodus 19:10, where, two or three days before the giving of the law, the Israelites were ordered to "wash" their clothes; hence it is said in the Talmud[33], to prove that dipping was used at the entrance of the Israelites into covenant, according to which the baptism, or dipping of proselytes, is said to be; "From whence is it (or a proof of it?) From what is written (Ex. 19:10) where there is an obligation to wash clothes, there is an obligation to dip."

And again, (Ex. 24:8) "Moses 'took it (the blood) and sprinkled it on the people'; and there is no sprinkling without dipping." And in another place[34], "Sprinkling of blood (or sacrifice, by which also the Israelites, it is said, were admitted into covenant) of it, it is written, 'And he sent young men of the children of Israel, which offered burnt offerings', &c. But dipping, from whence is it? From what is written; 'And Moses took half of the blood, and sprinkled it on the people'; and there is no sprinkling without dipping."

This is the proof, which surely cannot be satisfactory to a judicious mind; dipping is inferred from sprinkling; but though the blood was sprinkled upon the people, they were not dipped into it surely; nor even into water, from what appears; and though dipping and sprinkling are sometimes used together, as in the cleansing of the leper, and in the purification of one unclean, by the touch of an unclean bone, &c. (Lev. 14:7; Num. 19:19) yet the one was not the other. From washing of clothes dipping is also inferred, without any reason; for these two, in the above places, and in others, are spoken of as two distinct acts, and are expressed by different words; and yet it is upon this single circumstance the proof depends.

Now, as Dr. Owen[35] observes, "this washing of clothes served that single occasion only of showing reverence of the divine presence, at the peculiar giving of the law; nor did it belong to the stated worship of God; so that the necessity of the baptism of bodies, by a stated and solemn rite for ever, should arise from the single washing of garments, and that depending upon a reason, that would never more recur; of the observation of which no mention is made, nor any trace is extant in the whole Old Testament, and which is not confirmed by any divine command, institution, or direction, seems altogether improbable" And he elsewhere[36] says, "From this latter temporary occasional institution (ceremonial washing at Sinai) such as they (the Jews) had many granted to them, while they were in the wilderness, before the giving of the law, the Rabbins have framed a baptism for those who enter into their synagogue; a fancy too greedily embraced by some Christian writers, who would have the holy ordinance of the church's baptism to be derived from thence.

But this "washing of their clothes", not of their bodies, was temporary, never repeated; neither is there anything of any such baptism or washing required in any proselytes, either men or women, where the laws of their admission are strictly set down." And it may be further observed, that the Talmudists give this only

as a proof of the admission of Israelites into covenant; whereas, the solemn admission of them into it, even of the whole body of them, men, women, and children, and also of the proselytes who were in their camp, as all the Targums and the Greek version have it, when on the plains of Moab, at Horeb, before their entrance into the land of Canaan, (Deut. 29:10-12) was not by "any" of the "three" things they say the admission was, that is, by circumcision, baptism, and sacrifice; of the two latter not the least hint is given, and the former was not practised while the Israelites were in the wilderness, not till Joshua had introduced them into the land of Canaan.

The Jews seem to be conscious themselves that the baptism or dipping of proselytes, is no command of God; since at the circumcision of them, in the form of blessing they then use, they take no notice of it, which runs thus[37]. "Blessed art thou, O Lord God, the King of the world, who has sanctified us by his precepts, and has 'commanded' us 'to circumcise proselytes', and to fetch out of them the blood of the covenant; for if it was not for the blood of the covenant the heaven and earth would not be established; as it is said, 'If my covenant with day and night', &c.

Jeremiah 33:25." Dr. Lightfoot[38] carries this custom of admitting proselytes by baptism, or dipping, higher than the Jews themselves do. He ascribes the first institution and use of it to Jacob, when he was going to Bethel to worship, after the murder of the Sechemites by his sons; when, the doctor says, he chose into his family and church, some of the Shechemites and other heathens. But some learned men of the Paedobaptist persuasion, have thought the notion is indefensible, and judged it most prudent to leave it to himself to defend it, or whomsoever may choose to undertake it[39]; and he himself was in doubt about the first institution of this sort of baptism; for he afterwards says, "We acknowledge that circumcision was of divine institution; but by whom baptism, that was inseparable from it, was instituted, is doubtful."

Certain it is, it has no foundation in what Jacob did, or ordered to be done, when he was about to go to Bethel, and worship there; previous to which he ordered his family to "put away the strange gods" that were among them, which they had brought with them from Shechem; and he likewise ordered them to be "clean", and "change their garments"; which cleanness, whether to be understood of abstaining from their wives, as some interpret it; or of washing of their bodies, as Aben Ezra, as a purification of them from the pollutions of the slain, as the Targum paraphrases it, and after that Jarchi: and which change of garments, whether understood of the garments of idolaters, which the sons of Jacob had taken and put on, when they stripped them; or of their own garments, defiled with the blood of the slain; or of their meaner or more sordid garments, for more pure and splendid ones.

All that can be concluded from hence is, and is by the Jews concluded, that when men come before God, they should come with clean bodies, and with clean garments; as an emblem of the more inward purity of their minds, which is necessary to every religious service and act of devotion, such as Jacob and his family were now about to perform, and which the very heathens themselves had a notion of; "Casta placent superis, pura cum veste venito"[40]. But not a word is here of any covenant Jacob and his family entered into, and much less of any proselytes from Shechem and Syria being brought into it with them, by baptism, or dipping, as is pretended.

I have met with another learned man[41], who carries up this custom higher still; and asserts, that Jacob did not feign out of his own brain this practice of washing the body, and of change of garments; but took it from the history of Adam, and from his example; and he supposes that Adam, at the solemn making the covenant with him, was washed in water, before he put on the garments given him of God; and that as he was the first who sacrificed, he was the first who was baptized by the command of God; and so baptism

was the most ancient of all the sacred rites.

But let the history of Adam be carefully read over by any man, and he will never find the least hint of this, nor observe the least shadow or appearance of it; but what is it that the imagination of man will not admit and receive, when once a loose is given to it? Pray, who baptized Adam, if he was baptized? Did God baptize him? Or did an angel baptize him? Or did Eve baptize him? Or did he baptize himself? Since then this rite or custom of admitting into covenant, whether Israelites or proselytes, by baptism or dipping, has no foundation but in the Talmuds; and the proof of it there so miserably supported from scripture, surely it can never be thought that Christian baptism was borrowed from thence; or that it is no other which is continued in the Christian church, being taken up as it was found by John the Baptist, Christ, and his apostles; the folly and falsehood of which will be evinced in the following chapter. ENDNOTES:

[1] Metteh Dan, sive Cosri, par. 2. fol. 18. 1.

[2] Vid. Wolfii Praefat. ad Bibliothec. Heb. p. 28.

[3] Fabricii Bibliograph. Antiquar. c. 1. s. 2. p. 3.

[4] Deut. Emend. Temp. l. 7. p. 323.

[5] Chronolog. Tables, Cent. 19.

[6] Praefat. ad Methurgeman, fol. 2.

[7] Deut. Sinceritate Heb. Text. l. 2. Exer. 2. c. 2.

[8] Infant Baptism no Institution of Christ, p. 23.

[9] T. Hieros. Yebamot, fol. 8. 4.

[10] Kiddushin, fol. 64. 4.

[11] Ibid. fol. 65. 2.

[12] Ibid. fol. 66. 1.

[13] Eruvin, fol. 22. 1.

[14] History of Infant Baptism, Introduct. p. 44.

[15] Vid. Wolfium, ut supra.

[16] T. Bab. Ceritot, fol. 9. 1.

[17] Yebamot, fol. 46. 1, 2. vid. Beracot, fol. 47. 2. Avodah Zarah, fol. 57. 2. & 59. 1.

[18] Works, vol. 1. p. 526. vol. 2. p. 117.

[19] Halicot Olam, p. 201.

[20] T. Bab. Yoma, fol. 54. 1. Megillah, fol. 16. 2. Kiddushin, fol. 39. 1.

[21] Pirke Abot, c. 2. s. 8.

- [22] T. Bab. Yebamot, fol. 71. 1.
- [23] Chinnuch, p. 17.
- [24] T. Bab. Yebamot, fol. 46. 1, 2.
- [25] Issure Biah, c. 14. s. 6.
- [26] T. Bab. Yebamot, fol. 78. 1.
- [27] Ibid. fol. 45. 2. & Gloss in ibid.
- [28] T. Bab. Yehamot, fol. 46. 2. & Gloss in ibid.
- [29] Ibid.
- [30] Ibid.
- [31] T. Bab. Cetubot, fol. 11. 1.
- [32] Cetubot, fol. 26. 1.
- [33] T. Bab. Ceritot, fol. 9. 1.
- [34] T. Bab. Yebamot, fol. 46. 2.
- [35] Theologoumen. l. 5. Digress. 1. p. 446.
- [36] On Heb. vol. 1. Exercitat. 19. p. 272.
- [37] Maimon. Hilchot Milah, c. 3. s. 4.
- [38] Chronicle of the Old Testament, p. 18. Harmony of the Evangelists, p. 465. Hor. Heb. in Matt. iii. 6.
- [39] Pfeiffer. Antiqu. Ebr. c. 1. s. 5. "et addit; uti et ejusdem collationem; quam inter hunc proselytorum baptismum et sacramentum initiationis christianorum instituit cum magno grano salis accipiendam putamus."
- [40] Tibullus, l. 2. eleg. 1.
- [41] Rhenferd. Orat. de Antiqu. Baptism, p. 954. ad Calcem Oper. Philolog.

---

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-gill/the-proof-of-this-custom-only-from-the-talmuds/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**