

John Lightfoot (1602–1675) and the Significance of Jewish Sources for the Defence of Infant Baptism

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This article contends that the importance of post-biblical Jewish legal sources for the development of the case for infant baptism in England has been significantly underestimated. Focusing on the Westminster Assembly debates on baptism, it demonstrates how John Lightfoot's interventions shaped contemporary understandings of that rite's historicity. Lightfoot's later work is shown to have further entrenched a conception of infant baptism as a development upon the proselyte baptism of the Jews. The study of Jewish texts thus emerges as having been an essential means of buttressing doctrine in mid- to late seventeenth-century England.

In 1770, a seventy-three-year-old John Gill finally completed the third volume of his *Body of practical divinity*, the first work of systematic theology to be written by a Baptist.¹ The volume, which comprises four books, runs the gamut of religious issues from daily prayer to the duties of Christian parenthood. Added to it, however, is an essay of a rather different nature, a dissertation on 'the baptism of Jewish proselytes', a rather abstruse topic for a volume which aimed to address 'practical concerns'.² Stranger still, the dissertation attracted so much attention that it was published the following year, 'at the desire of some', in a separate volume 'for the sake of such who may not choose to purchase the larger

¹ David Mark Rathel, 'A case study in Baptist catholicity: the Scriptures and the tradition in the theology of John Gill', *Baptist Quarterly* xlix/3 (2018), 108–16.

² John Gill, *A body of practical divinity: or, A system of practical truths, deduced from the sacred scriptures: which (with the two former volumes) completes the scheme of doctrinal and practical divinity*, London 1770, 468–529.

work'.³ This essay, Gill's last, aimed to prove that 'Christian Baptism cannot be taken from, and founded upon, Proselyte-Baptism among the Jews'.

Gill was here challenging a then ubiquitous conception of infant baptism as rooted in the practices of the 'Jewish church', which had been argued for very convincingly by the renowned Hebraist, John Lightfoot, a century previously. This article reconstructs the development of this argument and its subsequent popularisation. In doing so, it reveals that by the middle of the seventeenth century, post-biblical Jewish sources had acquired far greater authority in England than the existing literature on 'Christian Hebraism' suggests.⁴ It also foregrounds the significance of the Westminster Assembly as a rare forum in which the latest advances in scholarship were brought to bear upon questions of immediate significance. These advances were particularly significant in the realms of Hebraic scholarship, the importance of which was much more broadly appreciated by the bulk of assemblymen than previous historians have led us to believe. It is only possible to demonstrate this thanks to the work of Chad van Dixhoorn, who has now made available both the papers and minutes generated by the Assembly and John Lightfoot's record of the same.⁵ This article therefore owes a great debt to the work of van Dixhoorn, as well to that of Kirsten Macfarlane and Jason Rosenblatt, who have both used the formal scholarship of notable assemblymen in tandem with Assembly records in order to better understand the significance of their participation in these debates.⁶

The importance of the Assembly's Hebraists in the development of political thinking in England has been drawn out by the superlative work

³ Idem, *A dissertation concerning the baptism of Jewish proselytes: in which are shewn, who they are of the proselytes of the Jews, said to be baptized; what the occasion of this dissertation concerning the baptism of them; what proof there is of any such custom among the Jews, before, at, or near the times of John the Baptist, Christ and his Apostles, or any age after, before the third and fourth centuries of the Christian æra; that the only proof of such a practice is from the Jewish Talmuds and talmudic authors; and that therefore Christian baptism cannot be taken from, and founded upon, proselyte-baptism among the Jews*, London 1771.

⁴ On 'Christian Hebraism' and its limitations see Anthony Grafton, 'Christian Hebraism and the rediscovery of Hellenistic Judaism', in Richard I. Cohen, Natalie B. Dohrman, Adam Shear and Elchanan Reiner (eds), *Jewish culture in early modern Europe: essays in honor of David B. Ruderman*, Cincinnati, OH 2014, 169–80, and Scott Mandelbrote and Joanna Weinberg, 'Introduction', in Scott Mandelbrote and Joanna Weinberg (eds), *Jewish books and their readers: aspects of the intellectual life of Christians and Jews in early modern Europe*, Leiden 2016, 1–7.

⁵ Chad van Dixhoorn and David Wright (eds), *The minutes and papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1652*, Oxford 2013 (hereinafter cited as MPWA); Chad van Dixhoorn, *John Lightfoot's journals of the Westminster Assembly*, Oxford 2023.

⁶ See Kirsten Macfarlane, 'John Lightfoot, the Westminster Assembly, and the *Horae Hebraice et Talmudicae*', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* liii/1 (2023), 87–116, and Jason P. Rosenblatt, *John Selden: scholar, statesman, advocate for Milton's muse*, Oxford 2021.

of Eric Nelson.⁷ This article, however, makes the case that their contributions went far further even than this. Discussions of church membership, church hierarchy and, most significantly, baptism, all featured copious references to the practices of the 'Jewish church'. This was on account of a by-then widespread understanding of the New Testament as a fundamentally Jewish text, which had been 'written by Jews, and among Jews, and addressed to and concerning Jews'.⁸ That Jewish sources should be cited in discussions about the contemporary Church and its ancient antecedent was axiomatic for those participating in this particular forum, even if they had disagreements as to exactly how much weight such evidence should carry.

Lightfoot's argument for paedobaptism as a development upon the proselyte-baptism of the Jews was an outgrowth of the many and varied debates on the subject of baptism which had taken place in the Westminster Assembly. These had prompted Lightfoot to investigate the matter in very great depth in the process of preparing his 'Talmudic' New Testament commentary, the *Horae Hebraicae*. Its successful transmission from that august forum to a wide variety of more popular publications is testament to the authority that had accrued to Lightfoot and to his Jewish sources by the later seventeenth century. It is also testament to the growing sophistication of the anti-paedobaptist case, which had, by the 1640s, very successfully assimilated developments in covenant theology in order to undermine the baptism-circumcision parallel, by which paedobaptism had been most commonly justified in Reformed churches. This justification for infant baptism, dubbed 'the paedobaptists Achilles' by John Tombes, had been so successfully undermined by the anti-paedobaptists as to necessitate its total reformulation by John Lightfoot.⁹ Lightfoot's mastery, and careful manipulation, of the relevant Jewish sources enabled him to produce a compelling argument for infant baptism as recounting the now defunct biblical baptism.¹⁰ Lightfoot's success in this regard is testament both to his own scholarly ingenuity and to the then widespread acceptance of the utility of the post-biblical Jewish legal tradition for reconstructing the history of the Early Church.

The breakdown of the argument from the baptism-circumcision analogy

Baptism for seventeenth-century Reformed Protestants in England was conceived of as the means by which a child was initiated into the society

⁷ See Eric Nelson, 'From Selden to Mendelssohn: Hebraism and religious freedom', in Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen (eds), *Freedom and the construction of Europe*, Cambridge 2013, i. 94–114.

⁸ 'a Judaeis sint scripti, atque inter, et ad Judaeos': John Lightfoot, *In Evangelium Sancti Matthaei horae hebraicae et talmudicae*, Cambridge 1658, sig. A3r.

⁹ 'John Tombes to Richard Baxter, 27 Dec. 1649', in *Letters that passed between Mr. Baxter and Mr. Tombes concerning the dispute*, London 1652, 412. ¹⁰ Ibid.

of the Church. This conception of initiation was rooted in the notion, common to covenant theology, that the relationship between God and his people was unchanging even if the means by which that covenant was sealed had changed over time. This meant that the covenant that Abraham sealed with God in Genesis was that self-same covenant that early modern Christians sealed with God.¹¹ Whilst these two ‘signs’ of the covenant, circumcision and baptism, differed in kind, they cohered in substance.

The argument for baptism by analogy with circumcision was developed most fully by Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli.¹² It was to prove incredibly important to the paedobaptists because it allowed for the identification of Old Testament proof-texts in support of their cause. This argument would come under considerable pressure, however, as developments in biblical scholarship questioned the extent to which Old Testament models had informed the practices of the Early Church. As scholars began to disentangle the mores of the ancient Israelites from those of the early Christians, ‘the argument of Baptisme from circumcision’, which rested upon a presumed continuity between the two Testaments, was suddenly under threat.¹³ At the same time, developments within covenant theology itself, wrought by John Cameron and John Ball, had given rise to an important distinction between ‘the promise’ of salvation which was sealed by circumcision, and its promulgation, which was sealed by baptism.¹⁴ Circumcision, on this account, was emblematic of the carnality of Old Testament ritual, which aimed, first and foremost, at establishing the particularity of Abraham and his progeny.¹⁵

¹¹ John Tombes, *Antipaedobaptism: or, No plain nor obscure scripture-proof of infants baptism, or church-membership: being the first part of the full review of the dispute about infant-baptism: containing an ample disquisition of the ingrafting, Rom. 11.17, the promise, Acts 2.39, the holinesse of children, I Cor. 7.14: whereby the expositions of those texts, and arguings thence for infant-baptism by Mr. Stephen Marshall, Mr. John Gere, Mr. Richard Baxter, Mr. Thomas Cobbet, Mr. Thomas Blake*, London 1652, 45.

¹² On Zwingli’s application of the covenant theology paradigm to the sacrament of baptism see Pierrick Hildebrand, *The Zurich origins of Reformed covenant theology*, Oxford 2024; Bryan D. Spinks, *Reformation and modern rituals and theologies of baptism: from Luther to contemporary practices*, Abingdon 2008, 32–4; Peter Stephens, ‘Zwingli’s sacramental views’, in E. J. Furcha and H. Wayne Pipkin (eds), *Prophet, pastor, Protestant: the work of Huldrych Zwingli after 500 years*, Eugene, OR 1984, 155–69; Peter Stephens, *The theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, Oxford 1986; and Adolf Fugel, *Tauflehre und Taufliturgie bei Huldrych Zwingli*, Lausanne 1989.

¹³ This was a concern raised by George Gillespie at the 112th session of the Westminster Assembly in response to the suggestion that ‘eldership’ might not have existed as a distinct ecclesiastical office within the ‘Jewish Church’: *MPWA* ii. 432–4.

¹⁴ See Kirsten Macfarlane, ‘Why did Henry Dunster reject infant baptism? Circumcision and the Covenant of Grace in the seventeenth-century transatlantic Reformed community’, this *JOURNAL* lxxii/2 (2021), 323–51.

¹⁵ See John Cameron, *De triplici dei cum homine foedere theses*, Heidelberg 1608, 28, and John Ball, *A tryall of the new-church way in New-England and in old*, London 1644, 36–45.

Europe's leading covenant theologians, by the middle of the seventeenth century, had, rather problematically, arrived at a position which closely approximated that reached by the continental Anabaptists of a century prior. They were now willing to admit of a two-fold covenant, which, in its Abrahamic form, served only as a foretaste of the grace which would be fully realised with Christ's coming.¹⁶ In this revised form, covenant theology, which had provided paedobaptists with a solid theological and exegetical basis for their position, now gravely threatened it.

The Westminster Assembly: the application of Jewish learning to the question of baptism

The body charged with resolving this and other theological and ecclesiological challenges in England was the Westminster Assembly, called by the Long Parliament in 1643, which would sit all the way through to 1652. It might be usefully thought of as 'the last of the post-Reformation synods'.¹⁷ The Assembly's membership included some of the greatest scholars of the age including John Selden, John Lightfoot and Henry Hammond. These men were tasked with deciding upon the governance and practices of the English Church. Their decisions would be codified in a *Directory of publique worship* and a new catechism as well as a series of 'Articles of Christian religion'. In this highly unusual context, 'long-running ecclesiological debates' were suddenly pressing, as competing church histories did battle and 'Jewish and oriental learning' assumed a rare contemporary political relevance.¹⁸

Lightfoot is often remembered for the role he played both as participant in the Westminster Assembly's debates and as chief chronicler of them.¹⁹ His historical reputation was made, however, first and foremost by his *Horae Hebraicae* (1658–78), a masterful 'Talmudic' commentary on the New Testament. This work, which would remain in print well into the nineteenth century, provided a model for the application of Jewish scholarship

¹⁶ See Robert Rollock, *Quaestiones et responsiones aliquot de foedere dei*, Edinburgh 1596, sigs B5v–B6r, and Richard Muller, 'Divine covenants, absolute and conditional: John Cameron and the early orthodox development of Reformed covenant theology', *Mid-America Theological Journal* xvii (2006), 11–16, 53–6.

¹⁷ Chad van Dixhoorn, 'The Westminster Assembly and the reformation of the 1640s', in Anthony Milton (ed.), *The Oxford history of Anglicanism*, Oxford 2017, i. 430–42.

¹⁸ Hunter Powell, *The crisis of British Protestantism: church power in the Puritan revolution, 1638–44*, Manchester 2015, 58–90; Chad van Dixhoorn, 'The seventeenth century and the Westminster Assembly', in Gary Scott Smith and P. C. Kemeny (eds), *The Oxford handbook of Presbyterianism*, Oxford 2019, 29–49.

¹⁹ See Van Dixhoorn, *Lightfoot's journals*.

to New Testament exegesis for over three hundred years.²⁰ Evidence of the remarkable endurance of Lightfoot's scholarly reputation is to be found in the *Baptist encyclopaedia* of 1881, which could think of no greater praise for John Gill than that he had been referred to as 'the Doctor John Lightfoot of the Baptists', a moniker which was judged to flatter 'Doctor Lightfoot more than Doctor Gill'.²¹

In his *Horae*, Lightfoot picked up many of the threads of discussions which took place in the Assembly which had not been concluded to his satisfaction.²² He turned to the subject of baptism time and again, wrestling with its origins, its spiritual significance and its relationship to circumcision. For Lightfoot, the significance of rooting contemporary practice in ancient models was axiomatic and it was to post-biblical Jewish sources that he looked for evidence.

Lightfoot first addressed the question of the Jewish origins of baptism in his first published work, *Erubhin* (1629), subtitled 'Miscellanies Christian and Iudaicall'.²³ This was a curious publication, apparently 'penned for Recreation at Vacant hours'. It gives us a very good sense of what Lightfoot was reading in the years 1628–9, when he dedicated himself almost exclusively to studying the Sion College collections.²⁴ Within the work we encounter the germination of Lightfoot's argument for baptism as a traditional Jewish initiation ritual, which was proffered as an alternative to circumcision in cases of mass conversions.²⁵ As Lightfoot cited no source for this claim here, it is very difficult to establish where it came from. I suspect, however, that his source was Hugh Broughton's *Commentary* on the Book of Daniel, which Lightfoot would later prepare for publication. There, Broughton had written that the Gemara in *Yevamoth* 76 and Maimonides in *Issurei Biah* 13 had recorded that 'in the days of David and Solomon, when many thousands of heathen became proselytes: they were admitted onely by Baptism'.²⁶ Neither of these sources makes this claim, however, though both state that, under Kings David and Solomon, converts were not accepted. Maimonides indicated that such converts as had undergone טבילה (ritual immersion), rendered 'baptism' by Broughton, were not turned away immediately, however, but allowed to live among the Jewish

²⁰ See Bruce Chilton, 'Jesus within Judaism', in Jacob Neusner (ed.), *Judaism in late antiquity*, Leiden 1994, ii. 262–84.

²¹ William Cathcart, *The Baptist encyclopaedia*, Philadelphia, PA 1881, i. 453.

²² See Macfarlane, 'John Lightfoot'.

²³ John Lightfoot, *Erubhin: or, Miscellanies Christian and Iudaicall*, London 1629, 80–1.

²⁴ See Newton E. Key, 'Lightfoot, John', *ODNB*, at <<https://doi-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/16648>>.

²⁵ Lightfoot, *Erubhin*, 80–1.

²⁶ Hugh Broughton, *The works of the great Albionean divine, renown'd in many nations for rare skill in Salems & Athens tongues*, London 1662, 201.

people for a time in order to prove the sincerity of their conversions (*Issurei Biah* 13.15). Neither in the Gemara nor in the *Mishneh Torah*, as Gill indicated in his *Dissertation concerning the baptism of Jewish proselytes*, is there any indication that טְבִילָה (ritual immersion) or baptism was ever proffered as an alternative to circumcision.²⁷ In fact, the opposite is clearly stated in *Issurei Biah* 13.6: 'A convert who is circumcised but not immersed or immersed but not circumcised, he is not a convert until he has immersed and been circumcised.'

Lightfoot's account of baptism here was obviously inaccurate but it does reveal two things which are significant for our purposes. Firstly, it demonstrates Lightfoot's, and indeed Broughton's, longstanding interest in uncovering the Old Testament roots of the baptismal rite, and secondly, it reveals the limitations of Lightfoot's Jewish scholarship in the years preceding his catalytic participation in the Westminster Assembly. There, for the first time, Lightfoot was forced to confront the weaknesses of the paedobaptist position to which he would continue to hold firm.

In the context of the English Civil War, anti-paedobaptist opinions, which might previously have been suppressed, were fast gaining popularity. As a result, significant time was taken up over the course of the Assembly's sitting with discussions of this worrying phenomenon.²⁸ Robert Baillie, one of the Assembly's Scottish commissioners, noted with particular concern the prevalence of anti-paedobaptist sentiment in the army.²⁹ Edward Calamy was especially disturbed by the growing enthusiasm for private baptisms in London, which had left many with the impression that baptism was 'no church ordinance'.³⁰ The general consensus amongst the assembled was that anti-paedobaptist sentiment needed to be quelled. To this end, a particularly learned exponent of that view, John Tombes, was invited to explain his position such that it could be refuted. This would prove more difficult than the members of the Assembly had hoped.

Tombes's case for 'believer's baptism' was made before the Assembly in July of 1644, following which 'a friendly conference' on the subject was held between him and Stephen Marshall.³¹ Tombes outlined his objections to infant baptism in terms of the revised covenant theology paradigm which had been proffered by leading Scottish theologian, John Cameron.

²⁷ Gill, *Baptism of Jewish proselytes*, 25.

²⁸ MPWA ii. 451; iii. 618, 250, 232.

²⁹ Robert Baillie, *The letters and journals of Robert Baillie*, Edinburgh 1775, i. 408, 437.

³⁰ MPWA ii. 198.

³¹ John Tombes, 'An exercitation about infant-baptisme: presented in certaine papers, to the chair-man of a committee of the Assembly of Divines, selected to consider of that argument, in the yeers 1643, and 1644', in John Tombes, *Two treatises and an appendix to them concerning infant-baptisme*, London 1646.

Cameron distinguished between the *foedus promissum* of the Old Testament and the *foedus promulgatum* of the New. He argued that Abraham was not a recipient of the 'pure Gospel-covenant' but rather a 'mixt' covenant which entailed promises both 'Evangelical' and 'Domestique'.³² The evangelical promises were due to all who would hear 'the Gospel'; the domestic promises, however, were 'civil promises', of prime significance only to 'the House of Abraham'.³³ These were 'signified and confirmed' by circumcision to 'Abrahams seed' alone and were therefore not due to the 'believers of the gentiles'.³⁴ 'Christs disciples', who had themselves been circumcised, still underwent baptism as a consequence of their having 'professed repentance and faith in Christ'.³⁵ Therefore, Tombes argued, the New Testament proffered baptism not as analogous with circumcision but as a necessity for entry into the 'Gospel-covenant', which could not be fully realised in circumcision.³⁶

These arguments had significant implications not just for infant baptism but for the very structure of the English national Church, which granted membership to all from the point of baptism.³⁷ For Tombes, this posed a serious problem for there was not in England, nor anywhere else 'such national-church as among the Israelites', which was covenanted to God in its entirety.³⁸ The sealing of the covenant therefore had to be administered on an individual basis as was the case with the baptisms performed by 'John Baptiste and Christs Disciples', which 'some affirme' were rooted in the Jewish conversion rite.³⁹ This rite entered Gentiles 'into the profession of Judaisme' as opposed to the Jewish 'political identity', which was sealed through circumcision.⁴⁰

John Tombes refuted

The publication of Tombes's *Two treatises on infant-baptism* in the final days of 1645 was greeted with dread by the Westminster Assembly. A special committee was quickly established to formulate an official response to the 'dangerous and schismaticall practices' that were advocated therein.⁴¹ This response would come in the form of a fairly substantial work entitled *A defence of infant-baptism*, swiftly drawn up by Tombes's old sparring-partner, Steven Marshall. Marshall's defence of infant baptism mostly consisted in the reassertion of the baptism-circumcision analogy, which Tombes had very competently rejected. For Marshall, that all 'Reformed divines' and even John Ball, whom Tombes had cited so approvingly, accepted that 'Circumcision and Baptisme' both 'sealed the entrance into the covenant'

³² Ibid. 2.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. 3.

³⁵ Ibid. 4.

³⁶ Ibid. 2.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. 21, 33.

³⁹ Ibid. 4, 34.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 33.

⁴¹ MPWA iii. 728.

should have been enough to close the case.⁴² He did acknowledge, however, that Tombes had raised a very interesting point with regard to the role of baptism in the Jewish conversion process for ‘the learned Gentleman Mr. Selden, and Mr. Ainsworth on Gen. 17 and Mr. Lightfootes *Elias Redivivus*’ had all made mention of ‘the use of Baptisme’ in ‘the Jewish church’.⁴³ This was, in fact, Marshall argued, the beginning of ‘a good Argument’ for infant baptism because, as Selden had demonstrated out of a vast array of Jewish sources, ‘infants of the gentiles were made proselytes’.⁴⁴ If therefore, as Tombes had claimed, Christian baptism did turn out to be rooted in the Jewish practice of proselytical baptism, this would be very problematic for the anti-paedobaptist cause.

Whilst Marshall’s refutations of Tombes’s arguments were largely conventional, his engagement with the question of the Jewish conversion process indicates a shift in the paedobaptist-anti-paedobaptist debate in England away from covenant theology and towards establishing the historical foundations of the baptismal rite. Both Marshall and Tombes accepted that the origins of baptism should be fundamental to its contemporary administration, and, for both, these origins could be uncovered through careful study of the relevant Jewish literature. For Marshall, that both Maimonides and the Talmud, sources cited by Selden on this question, affirmed that Jewish proselyte-baptism was undertaken by children greatly undermined the anti-paedobaptist position.⁴⁵ The use of Jewish legal texts here as historical sources is instructive for it demonstrates the significance that these held for the Westminster Assembly. Historians have tended to assume that the Hebraic scholarship of Lightfoot and Selden was of very little interest to the other members of that body, though this turns out not to have been the case.⁴⁶ As the minutes of the Assembly’s further discussions on baptism show, this was widely understood to be a subject to which both Jewish law and Jewish biblical commentary could speak authoritatively.

The Westminster Assembly on the proper modes of baptism

The Assembly’s first debate on the subject of baptism, which considered the legitimacy of private baptisms, revealed the extent of the threat that anti-

⁴² See Stephen Marshall, *A defence of infant-baptisme: in answer to two treatises*, London 1646.

⁴³ Ibid. 170–1. See John Selden, *De jure naturali et gentium: juxta disciplinam Ebraeorum, libri septem*, London 1640, 146–7.

⁴⁴ Marshall, *Infant-baptisme*, 170–1.

⁴⁵ See Anthony Grafton, ‘Christianity’s Jewish origins rediscovered: the roles of comparison in early modern ecclesiastical scholarship’, *Erudition and the Republic of Letters* i/1 (2016), 13–42, 17–18, and Nelson, ‘From Selden to Mendelssohn’, 94–114.

paedobaptism was perceived to pose.⁴⁷ This question got to the heart of the two different biblical bases for baptism considered in the debate between Tombes and Marshall, the public baptisms recorded in the New Testament or the private circumcisions recorded in the Old. For Lightfoot, the rite of circumcision, which is administered on the eighth day of a Jewish boy's life, could not always have taken place in synagogue for 'in great townes' this would have meant almost daily public circumcisions.⁴⁸ On this basis, he argued that baptisms, which paralleled circumcisions, should be held either in public or in private, just as circumcisions had been.⁴⁹ Despite the force of Lightfoot's argument, which affirmed the familiar baptism-circumcision parallel, the assembled did not vote to permit private baptisms. It is likely that the deciding factor in this instance was the rising tide of anti-paedobaptism, which, it was decided, would be best combatted through the compulsory baptism of children in local parish churches.⁵⁰ What this debate reveals is that even though the baptism-circumcision parallel remained the predominant basis upon which infant baptism was justified, making arguments as to how baptisms should be performed by analogy with the performance of circumcisions proved difficult. Most assemblymen seemed to expect baptisms to mirror those recorded in the New Testament, which were of adults, not children.⁵¹

A later debate on the permitted modes of baptism yielded further confusion. Many assemblymen were of the view that baptism by full immersion, as undergone by Jesus, was preferable to the more common mode of baptism by sprinkling.⁵² Lightfoot, who was concerned that to permit baptism by dipping could lead ministers to 'countenance to anabaptists', made an authoritative intervention in opposition to this popular proposal on that basis.⁵³ He purported to show that the ancient Israelites had entered into the covenant at Mount Sinai by 'sacrifice, sprinkling & baptism', but that was not by dipping, but sprinkling'.⁵⁴ This was a truly astonishing claim which completely overturned the assumptions of all present, none of whom appear to have been familiar with the proof-text Lightfoot proceeded to present, which was a comment by Rashi on Exodus xxiv.6. The verse recounts the sacrifices brought before the Israelites received the Law: 'And Moses took half of the blood, and put it in basins; and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar.' The cited comment reads: 'Two basins, one for half of the blood drawn from the burnt offerings and one for half of the blood drawn from the peace offerings, in order that the blood of both could be sprinkled upon the people.'

⁴⁷ MPWA ii. 198.

⁴⁸ Van Dixhoorn, *Lightfoot's journals*, 442.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 443.

⁵⁰ MPWA ii. 198

⁵¹ Ibid. ii. 198–201.

⁵² Ibid. iii. 212–14.

⁵³ Ibid. iii. 219.

⁵⁴ Ibid. iii. 216.

In neither the verse cited nor its corresponding comment is there any mention of the sprinkling of water. That Lightfoot was aware of this is made clear in his journal in which he refers explicitly to the 'sprinkling of blood', which he claimed was accompanied by the 'sprinkling of water' as was recorded in Hebrews ix.19.⁵⁵

The following day, the Assembly came to vote on the precise wording which would accompany the baptismal ceremony in the *Directory of public worship*. Whilst many seemed to want to leave ministers with some leeway as to the performance of this rite, by merely stating that baptism by sprinkling was 'lawful', Lightfoot argued strongly against this proposition. For him, sprinkling had to be declared 'sufficient' and the possibility of baptism by dipping could not be mentioned at all.⁵⁶ His colleagues eventually agreed with him and thus the resultant *Directory* defines baptism as 'sprinkling and washing with water' children, such that they might be considered 'Christians, and federally holy before baptisme'. Not only was this mode of baptism to be deemed 'sufficient', but no 'other ceremony' was to be added to it.⁵⁷ Lightfoot had thus successfully marshalled his Jewish learning to convince his colleagues that baptism by full immersion was no more ancient than baptism by sprinkling and that therefore full immersion could, justifiably, be excluded from the *Directory*.

The success of Lightfoot's intervention in this instance demonstrates two things. Firstly, it shows the Assembly to have been very receptive to arguments from Jewish sources and, secondly, it shows that these sources were not familiar to the vast majority of its members. Lightfoot's argument from Rashi was accepted without challenge because of the level of learning required to challenge it. His expertise as a Hebraist was generally acknowledged by his colleagues who, on that basis, looked to him to rule authoritatively from 'the pandects of the Jews'.⁵⁸

Lightfoot returns to the question of infant baptism

Lightfoot's later work reveals him to have greatly developed his thinking on baptism and many other subjects following his participation in the debates of the Westminster Assembly.⁵⁹ Much of this work demonstrates the extent to which he was aware of the limitations of what the Assembly had concluded. On the subject of baptism, in particular, Lightfoot appears to have been painfully aware of the inadequacy of the official response to Tombes, who had exposed the weaknesses of the baptism-circumcision analogy as a

⁵⁵ Van Dixhoorn, *Lightfoot's journals*, 442.

⁵⁶ MPWA iii. 219.

⁵⁷ *A directory for the public worship of God*, London 1644, 22.

⁵⁸ Van Dixhoorn, *Lightfoot's journals*, 442. ⁵⁹ See Macfarlane, 'John Lightfoot'.

basis upon which infant baptism could be justified. In the Assembly, Lightfoot had argued strongly for the parallels between infant baptism and infant circumcision, though in his later work he took great pains to ground the origins of the baptismal rite in Jewish proselyte-baptism.⁶⁰ This was not in itself controversial, for Marshall too had accepted the characterisation of biblical baptism as rooted in the Jewish conversion process, which explained why its requirements were not documented in the New Testament, whose first readers would all have had first-hand knowledge of it.⁶¹ Lightfoot's contribution, however, was to incorporate Tombes's characterisation of the Abrahamic covenant as containing both 'evangelical' and 'civil' elements into his justification for paedobaptism.⁶²

Whilst accepting that the roots of the baptismal rite lay in conversion to Judaism, such conversions, according to Lightfoot, were civil, not religious in character. Whilst Tombes had argued that the essence of proselyte baptism was its signifying the entry of the proselyte into the 'profession of Judaism', Lightfoot claimed that its greatest significance lay in its simulating a 're-birth' into a new religion.⁶³ Through the Jewish conversion process, a Gentile was re-born as a Jew and a slave re-born as a freeman.⁶⁴ In fact this notion of proselytical re-birth was taken so literally that Maimonides had ruled that a special prohibition had to be introduced such that a brother and a sister who had both converted to Judaism could not marry according to Jewish law.⁶⁵

For Lightfoot, as for Marshall, the Law did allow for the conversion of children as per the Talmudic principle of the permissibility of procuring a benefit for one's fellow without his knowledge. Jewish status, when conceived as a benefit, could thus be procured on behalf of a minor.⁶⁶ Proselyte baptism, contrary to Tombes's assertions, therefore was not so much the sign of a 'profession made' but a physical testament to a spiritual rebirth, which could be consented to on behalf of a minor.⁶⁷ Christian baptism, for Lightfoot, was rooted in this notion of rebirth through ritual immersion. In baptism, one was reborn to a new inheritance, to the kingdom of heaven.⁶⁸ For the first Christians, baptism had an even more

⁶⁰ Tombes, 'Exercitation about infant-baptisme', 34.

⁶¹ Marshall, *Infant-baptisme*, 170–1.

⁶² Tombes, 'Exercitation about infant-baptisme', 2.

⁶³ Ibid. 34.

⁶⁴ 'Maimon. In *Issurei biah*, cap. 14. *Ethnicus qui sit Proselytus, et servus qui est manumissus, Ecce ille est sicut parvulus jam natus*': ibid. 76.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ 'Maimon. In *Avadim*, cap. 8. *Si Israelitaprehendat parvulum Gentilem aut inveniet infantem Gentilem; eumque baptizet in nomine Proselyti, ecce, ille est proselytus*': Lightfoot, *S. Matthaei*, 43.

⁶⁷ Tombes, 'Infant baptism', 34.

⁶⁸ 'docet Christus aliusmodi generationem require ad participationem regni Messiae, quam vel eam quae sit per israelitismum, vel eam quae per proselytismum; nempe ut nascatur quis Ανοθεν, vel coelesti generatione, ut capax fiat regni coelorum': Lightfoot, *S. Matthaei*, 43.

fundamental significance than this, however, for not only were they coming into a new inheritance, but they were renouncing their former religion, be that Judaism or paganism.⁶⁹ This conception of the relationship between the first Christian baptisms and baptism as it was administered in his own day forced Lightfoot to revisit the revised covenant theology paradigm that Tombes was operating within which distinguished sharply between the *foedus promissum* of the old covenant and the *foedus promulgatum* of the new. This was a framework within which Lightfoot could operate comfortably, for, as a Reformed Protestant, he understood the coming of Christ to have entailed the renunciation of 'the doctrine of justification by the works of the law'.⁷⁰ This was the inheritance that the first to be baptised as Christians were renouncing. Children born of Christian parents who had never held firm to this doctrine did not renounce it through baptism. The Church had therefore to evolve a new initiation rite appropriate to them since they had known no other religion.⁷¹ Infant baptism for early modern Christians then was not biblical baptism, he conceded, but rather an ablution which signified the washing away of sin 'by the blood of Christ'.⁷² Biblical baptism entailed 'a deeper and more stricter washing' which aimed at removing the stain of a former 'religion, namely Judaism or paganism'.⁷³ The harshness of biblical baptism, Lightfoot argue, should not be imposed on those born into the faith, who had no prior religion to be cleansed of.⁷⁴ Paedobaptism, for Lightfoot, observed 'in a triple way the history of the New Testament'.⁷⁵ It recounted the evolution of God's relationship to his chosen people, through Jewish conversion, John's baptisms and Christian baptism thereafter. Paedobaptism signified the entry of a child into this divine inheritance.⁷⁶

Lightfoot's clever reconceptualisation of the religious significance of infant baptism would prove influential. It demonstrated, in the first instance, that this was a rite of great antiquity and, in the second, that neither the circumcisions recorded in the Old Testament nor the baptisms recorded in the New supplied a model to be followed by contemporary Christians. It is important to note, however, that the historical evidence that Lightfoot used to build his case was sorely lacking. Whilst he was able to prove that there was a legal rationale for the conversion of a child, this did

⁶⁹ 'Quod signum poenitentiae apud Judaeos summe requisitum, atque apud tunc introductos in professionem evangelicae necessarium ut per hoc aperte profiterentur, se doctrinae de justificatione per opera legis abrenunciare': *ibid.* 35.

⁷⁰ 'se doctrinae de justificatione per opera legis abrenunciare': *ibid.* ⁷¹ *Ibid.* 49.

⁷² 'per sanguinem Christi': *ibid.*

⁷³ 'Hoc est, polluta religione, Judaismo nempe, aut ethnicismo; a qua si, pro more gentis, profundiore, ac severiore alutione transirent': *ibid.* ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ 'Ut triplicem eam sisse in Novi Testamenti historia': *ibid.* 50.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

not actually demonstrate that which he claimed it did, namely that ‘paedobaptism in the Jewish Church, for the admission of proselytes, was so well known, customary, and frequent – indeed, almost nothing was more known, customary and frequent’.⁷⁷ The conversion of children in Jewish law is actually a very complex matter, for such conversions are only considered binding once the child in question reaches the age of majority, at which point he can decide for himself whether or not he wishes to live out the rest of his life as a Jew. The Talmudic principle upon which Maimonides, whom Lightfoot cited on this point, relied to make the case for a conversion of a minor is derived from the Gemara in *Ketuboth* 11a where the ambiguous status of a minor convert is thus spelled out. Whilst it is conceivable that Lightfoot himself was not aware of this Gemara, it is cited in full in Selden’s *De jure naturali* and therefore his decision not to mention it was obviously deliberate.⁷⁸ That Lightfoot could get away with this sleight of hand is, once again, indicative of both the authority he projected as an expert Hebraist and of the rarity of that authority.

An eighteenth-century Baptist confronts Lightfoot’s legacy

The great enthusiasm with which Lightfoot’s account of infant baptism was taken up demonstrates, first and foremost, the surprising authority that had accrued to Jewish sources and those who studied them by the middle of the seventeenth century in England. It also points to the grave threat that anti-paedobaptism was believed to pose during the English Interregnum and beyond, such that new arguments from relatively unfamiliar sources were quickly integrated into the mainstream. Whilst the contemporary historian should not be convinced by Lightfoot’s arguments, his fellow paedobaptists greatly appreciated his rooting of infant baptism in the origins of Christianity, which could be reconstructed from Jewish legal sources. The deeply-felt need to defend infant baptism was on account of the dangerous implications for church membership implicit in the anti-paedobaptist position. As John Gale pointed out, to dismiss the case for infant baptism was to accept that, as things stood, most so-called ‘Christians’ were ‘not rightly initiated’ into the body of the Church and as such had ‘no Title therefore to Church-Membership’.⁷⁹ For this reason, despite their limitations and even their broad incomprehensibility, Lightfoot’s

⁷⁷ ‘Quod signum poenitentiae apud Judaeos summe requisitum, atque apud tunc introductos in professionem evangelicae necessarium: ut per hoc aperte profiterentur, se doctrinae de justificatione per opera legis abrenunciare’: *ibid.* 44.

⁷⁸ Selden, *De jure*, 146–7.

⁷⁹ John Gale, *Reflections on Mr. Wall’s history of infant-baptism*, London 1711, 81.

arguments, which were believed to be deeply rooted in the authoritative 'Jewish writers', were given pride of place in the paedobaptist's armoury. As one letter of 1657 from William Outram to Lightfoot indicates, Lightfoot was understood to have 'reconciled' many to the necessity of infant baptism.⁸⁰ George Bright, in his *Life of Lightfoot* (1684), would list his 'proving Infants Baptism against the Antipaedobaptists of those times' as among his crowning achievements.⁸¹ William Wall's *History of infant baptism* (1705) would further enshrine Lightfoot's 'historical' justification for paedobaptism for generations.⁸² This work, which would remain in print until well into the 1890s, was, according to Gill, the basis upon which paedobaptists felt they could 'swagger' into debates with Baptists, entirely confident that history was on their side.⁸³ Their case rested, however, on the attribution of great authority to the post-biblical Jewish legal tradition, which had been codified in 'the *Talmuds*' some 'three or four hundred years after the time of *John* the Baptists, Christ, and his apostles'.⁸⁴ For Gill, the weakness of the anti-paedobaptist cause in England had been entrenched by the Hebraists of the seventeenth century whose arguments relied upon the historical authority of Jewish law.⁸⁵

This article has revealed the problems with Lightfoot's arguments to have been far more serious than those pointed to by Gill, whose primary accusation against his illustrious forebear was one of anachronism. Lightfoot has been shown to have misrepresented evidence drawn from Jewish sources in order to convince his audiences of the strengths of the paedobaptist position.⁸⁶ This demonstrates that the status accorded to the Jewish legal tradition at this time was far greater than has previously been appreciated despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that few had the facility to truly engage with it.

Lightfoot has also been shown to have been a profoundly creative thinker, whose facility with the Talmudic literature powerfully served the cause of orthodoxy in England. Tombes's application of the revised covenant theology framework of Cameron and Ball, which distinguished sharply between the *foedus promissum* and the *foedum promulgatum*, had significantly undermined the case for infant baptism. Through his careful manipulation of Jewish sources, Lightfoot was able to employ this very same

⁸⁰ See William Outram, 'Dr. W. Outram to Dr. Lightfoot, May 1st, 1657', in John Lightfoot, *The whole works of the Rev. John Lightfoot*, London 1825, xiii. 365.

⁸¹ George Bright, 'Some account of the life of the Reverend and most learned John Lightfoot', in *The works of the reverend and learned John Lightfoot D. D. late Master of Katherine Hall in Cambridge, such as were, and such as never before were printed*, London 1684, 21–2.

⁸² William Wall, *The History of infant-baptism*, London 1707, 44–6. ⁸³ Ibid. 37.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 47. ⁸⁵ Gill, *Baptism of Jewish proselytes*, 25. ⁸⁶ Lightfoot, *S. Matthæi*, 44.

framework to strengthen the case for the same. Whilst recent scholarship has alerted us to the significance of Hebraism for the development of political thinking in this seventeenth century, this does not go nearly far enough. The Westminster Assembly, as Chad van Dixhoorn has shown, devoted much more time to questions of theology than of ecclesiology, which is not reflected in the extant literature.⁸⁷ This article has revealed the work of the Assembly to have had profound implications for the development of the case for paedobaptism in England. At the heart of this work lay the rediscovery of the post-biblical Jewish legal tradition, which was authoritatively represented in the Assembly by Selden and Lightfoot. This enterprise, in Lightfoot's own words, began with the recognition that 'all the books of the New Testament were written by Jews, and among Jews, and addressed to and concerning Jews'.⁸⁸ Whilst existing accounts of 'Christian Hebraism' have showcased the vast range of works that such thinking gave rise to, they have yet to reveal just how mainstream it had become by the middle of the seventeenth century.⁸⁹ Lightfoot's arguments for infant baptism from Jewish sources proved difficult to contradict on account of their obscurity, though, if anything, much to Gill's frustration, this only served to enhance their authority. The frequency with which Lightfoot would be cited on this issue, and many more, over the course of the eighteenth and even nineteenth centuries is testament to the weight that Jewish legal sources carried in theological debate far beyond the elite circles of 'Christian Hebraists' with which we are familiar. Lightfoot's contributions to Assembly debates made plain to him the utility of Jewish sources for Christian theological exegesis, which was the cause to which he dedicated his subsequent and hugely effective scholarly career.

⁸⁷ Chad van Dixhoorn, 'New taxonomies of the Westminster Assembly (1643–52): the creedal controversy as case study', *Reformation & Renaissance Review* vi/1 (2004), 82–106 at p. 85.

⁸⁸ 'a Judaeis sint scripti, atque inter, et ad Judaeos': Lightfoot, *S. Matthaei*, sig. A3r.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Stephen G. Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish studies (1564–1629) and Hebrew learning in the seventeenth century*, Leiden 1996; Sophie Kessler-Mesguich, 'Early Christian Hebraists', in Magne Saebo, Michael Fishbane and Jean Louis Ska (eds), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: the history of its interpretation*, Gottingen 2008, ii. 254–75; and Stephen G. Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation era (1500–1600)*, Leiden 2012.