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John Myles and His Times

The history of John Myles and his times forms a very interesting chapter in the history of Baptists especially of Welsh Baptists. Welsh Baptists are under obligations to him for his zeal and courage in spreading their principles in Wales and in America against much opposition. The age in which he lived was one of the most revolutionary in the history of our country. It was an age of social, political, and religious anguish. In it was fought the fiery and bloody battle of civil and religious liberty. It was an age of mental giants, such as Cromwell, Milton, Baxter, Owen, Goodwin, Bunyan, Roger Williams, Kiffin, Russel, Vavasor Powell, etc., etc.; and among them we have John Myles. Myles was a son of Walter Myles, of Newton, of Herefordshire, and was born in 1621 (day and month unknown). He was thus a few years younger than his famous contemporary, Vavasor Powell. There are three places named Newton in Herefordshire, and common tradition points to Newton Clodock as the birthplace of John Myles, but tradition points also to that community near the place where the rivers Olchon and Escler unite, as his birthplace. If tradition is reliable respecting the birthplace of John Myles, we are led to the sacred ground and classic place of Dissent. In the parish of Clodock, and not far from this spot, is the valley of Olchon, an old refuge of the Baptists for ages. Welsh were the inhabitants of those parts at that time, and they preached in Welsh, at least until 1760 or later. Not far from here the famous Welshman and poet, John Kent, labored centuries before the days of Myles. Near this place Sir John Old Castle, afterwards Lord Cobham, was born the friend and patron of Wyclif. According to Joshua Thomas, these places were leavened with the evangelical principles of the Lollards and Puritans by Dr. Bradwardine, Walter Brute, Sir John Old Castle, John Penry, the Welsh martyr, and others of the early reformers of our country. It is supposed, on these grounds and others, that friends of the principles of the New Testament were found here throughout the region of popery over our country. The geographical position of this place was well adapted for a refuge, for it was remote from the cities and towns and public ways, on the terminus of three counties and bishoprics. There is no doubt that the caves and rocks of the black mountain and the surrounding valleys had been frequently refuges for Christians, in the persecutions of former times.

John Myles was thus raised in the sound of the Puritanic principles, which doubtless gave proper direction to his vigorous mind and heroic spirit. Hence it was no wonder that he

was so zealous for religious liberty and the enlightenment of his nation in the principles of the Bible. His early life is a mystery to us. At the age of fifteen years we find him matriculated in Brasenose College, Oxford, March 11, 1636. This fact shows that his parents, as those of Vavasor Powell, were in comfortable circumstances before they could afford to send him there. The fact that he was sent there, when so young, proves also that he must have had a good education previous to this, and that he must have been a young man of rare abilities and studious taste. It is possible, also, that his parents may have designed him for the priesthood in the State Church. His college life, its impressions and duration, is not known. It is said that he began his ministry about 1645; but whether in Episcopal ordination, or as an unordained preacher like Vavasor Powell, is not satisfactorily known; but we are inclined to suppose that he did not receive ordination in the State Church, but that he gave himself to the work of the ministry in some distant parts of the country soon after he left the university. The religious condition of Wales at that time was deplorable, and it created profound feelings in the minds of many of the good men of that age. Vavasor Powell says that "A petition was sent to the King and Parliament about 1641, setting forth humbly and truly, by many responsible persons, that after minutely searching, scarcely were there found as many conscientious, settled preachers in Wales as there were counties in it." And the few that were there had either been silenced or greatly persecuted, and that religious professors were scarce, except in some corners of two or three counties. But soon after this the war broke out between the King and Parliament, so that Wales received no help, but, to the contrary, preachers and professors, notwithstanding their scarcity, were compelled to leave the country by the severity of the persecution. Their furniture and stock were seized by their opponents, and it was very hard on their wives and children. The priests in Wales had sunk very low in corruption, and they neglected their duties to the common people. They had no regard for their spiritual welfare, but delighted more in persecuting pious men who endeavored to do good. The result was that the masses were ignorant, superstitious, and ungodly, and that troubles and persecutions awaited the reformers. Religious literature was very scarce in Wales at that time, and social safety was an impossibility under the circumstances. Hence it was no wonder that the moral and religious condition of the Welsh was so low in that age. Myles began his ministry under these extremely unfavorable circumstances in the history of the country and nation.

The next time we meet with his name is in connection with a Parliamentary law called "An Act for the, Better Propagation of the Gospel in Wales," which was signed February 22, 1649, and went into operation March 23, 1650. His name is found among the Testors under that law. The fact that he was one of the Testors proves at once that he was a minister of the gospel, because such is the description given of them under that law, and that he stood high in the estimation of his brethren in the Principality. But the fact that his name is among the Testors does not prove that he was in the sacred orders of the Episcopal Church, because there were among the Testors some who never were known to have received holy orders of Episcopalians, such as Vavasor Powell and others, and it is probable that he was one of them. If what Walker says is correct, he could not have been the priest of the parish church of Ilston, for one W. Houghton was the priest of that church at that time, and was deposed by the Testors the following year after the law came in force, because of his unfitness for the position.

It seems to us, in this age, that that law was entirely contrary to the teachings of God's Word, and that it interfered with a matter that no civil government has any right to meddle with. We wonder that the eminent divines of that age gave their influence and co-operation to secure such a law. The only excuse that we can give for their conduct is that the question of the alliance of Church and State had not then received attention to the same extent that it has since. Reformation in the State Church, in its doctrine, worship, and conduct, was the chief and only attempt of the Puritans, from the days of Henry VIII until the days of Charles II, and not the formation of systems independent of, and separate from, that Church. The effects of the Act of Uniformity on more than two thousand of the best men of the Church is an indisputable proof of this. We have another remarkable instance of the same thing in the beginning of Methodism in Wales and Wesleyanism in England, a century later. They had no thought of establishing associations independent of the State Church. Their aim was to reform that Church, but they were led by an invisible hand, by a way unknown to them, until their labors ended in religious liberty. We see the same characteristic in the period under consideration. Liberty to worship God according to the convictions of the conscience of the worshiper was exceptional in that age, and was limited in many considerations, even under the democratic government. One of the worst mistakes of the democracy was to promote Presbyterianism to the seat of Episcopalianism, so that the Presbyter was only the priest "writ large," as Milton said. It is true that there were glorious exceptions to this in that age, but they were the exceptions, and not the rule. Besides this, this was an exceptional law, arising chiefly from the peculiar circumstances of that age. A petition had been made for it eight years before,<sup>1</sup> but it received no attention on account of the civil war. But as soon as the war was over, behold the same Parliament turning to the petition, and passing that exceptional Act for three years from March 25, 1650!

Many good men took advantage of this opportunity, regarding it as a door opened by Providence to preach the gospel to their people, who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death. Under this law one hundred and fifty preachers were sent to labor in Wales, and more good was done by this than will be known until the Judgment Day. Further, some Baptists, as Tombes, and some independents remained in the State Church until death, though their views on some doctrines were entirely opposed to it; others felt, though laboring outside of its boundaries, strongly opposed to organize churches and settle pastors over them in the same sense as this is understood now. We have an instance of this in Erbury's opposition to the organization of an independent church at Cardiff after the plan of Llanfaches Church. They looked upon the organization of a church as a novelty in the country, imported from the continent, and as a relic of popery adopted by the Reformers. Many of these wished to preach as itinerants through the country under this new law, without gathering congregations independent of the parish churches. The Act of Uniformity drove these men and their adherents out of the State Church, and not they themselves.

There was a cunning clause in this enactment which showed the desire of Parliament to aid the corrupt priests who had been deposed by the Romanists. It provided that a sum of not more than one-fifth of the income of the living was to be given to the wife and

children of the priest deposed. The democrats had a better conception of justice and mercy than the royalists in the reign of Charles II.

John Myles acted as a Testor under this Act, but the details of his history as such are not known, and we must be satisfied with the simple facts, and judge his conduct and others in the light of the age in which they lived. We come now to an important period in the history of his life that is, his uniting with the Baptists. The details of this event are also unknown, but it is an indisputable fact that he was a Baptist about the beginning of April, 1649.

In the old church book of Ilston, which John Myles took with him to America in or about the beginning of 1660, we have the history of the beginning of that church. On the first page we have the following heading: "Names of the brethren and sisters who were added to this church from the first day of the second month in 1649 to the 16th of the same month in 1650" that is, from April 1, 1649, to April 16th, 1650, a little more than a year. The first name on the list is John Myles, the next is Thomas Proud, of Llanddewi. John Myles was a Baptist at the above date, however long he may have been before that. Inasmuch as no place is named in connection with John Myles as Llanddewi is with Thomas Proud, it implies that John Myles lived at that time at Ilston. How he came to this part of the country is a mystery. It is certain that he came not here as a Testor under the new Act, for that was not then in operation.

John Myles was here at least a year before that law came into operation. He was not the priest of Ilston at this time, as has already been stated, but one Houghton according to Walker, though he might have officiated in an adjacent parish. It may be that his matrimonial relationships led him here, or that he served some number of religious people who were hiding from persecution, as the place was well adapted for such a purpose. Ilston is a parish in Gower about eight miles from Swansea, in that part of Glamorgan that lies between the Bristol Channel and the Loughor River. In this secluded and beautiful neighborhood we find John Myles in 1649. The church records the history of its origin in the old book in an article called, "A brief report of some of the chief providences of our Father towards us, his poor and despised people, who have by great grace been baptized into the name of Jesus Christ and to the profession of the Gospel, and have united in fellowship with one another in this church." "We cannot do less than admire the unsearchable wisdom, power, and love of God in bringing about his own purposes, which transcend the power and understanding of the wisest of men. Thus to the glory of his great name he dealt, for when there was no company or society of prophets setting forth and practicing the doctrines of worship and order and Gospel discipline, according to the primitive institution, that we ever heard of since the time of the apostasy, it pleased God to choose this dark corner to put his name in it, and to give us poor, unworthy creatures the honor of being the first in all these parts to observe the glorious ordinance of baptism, and gather together the first church of baptized believers."2

It is marvelous to think how this was brought about when we think of the various oppositions, the feebleness of the means through which God acted, and the greatness of the success with which God truly blessed unlikely means, to the end that he should be

magnified by all who should hear or read this report. We will now show how he began his work. God chose not the mighty and the most famous, for he needed not such, but he revealed his will first to John Myles and Thomas Proud, who in comparison with others might be considered inferior, especially in natural gifts, that the work might seem more of God. These brethren were led by the hand of Providence to London (and after our brethren had spent a day or two to seek the Lord, that he might send laborers to the dark corners and parts of this land), whence (from that church with which Brethren William Consett and Edward Draper walked, which now meets in the Glass House, Broad Street) they were again recommended to these parts after being absent about two weeks.

These are all the details we have of the history of John Myles uniting with the Baptists. It is not said that John Myles and Thomas Proud were baptized in London, and the object of their visit to the capital is not mentioned. What is said is, that they were the first two to whom the Lord revealed his will in this matter in these parts, that they were led to London, and that whilst they were there they came in contact with the church at the Glass House, which received them kindly, and regarded their coming among them as an answer to their special prayers for Wales, and that they were sent back by this church to labor in Wales. At the same time it seems very probable from this history, and from a letter written to Myles by Rev. J. Colman, pastor of Barnstable, dated May 9, 1650, that it was in London during this visit they were baptized. The following is a copy of the letter:

DEAR BROTHER MYLES Having heard lately, by some of your fellow-countrymen, and also by some of the brethren in London, of your seeking the way of the Lord in the participation of the ordinances of the Gospel in accordance with the proper mode of the Gospel, we could not less than bless the Father in your behalf, that you have fully submitted to the way of truth. Give my most fervent love to all the church.

Your kind brother in fellowship,  
J. Colman.  
Barnstable, May 9, 1650.

Some try to prove from this that there were no Baptists in Wales at this time; but this is as unfair as it would be to attempt to prove that there were no Baptists in London, when Richard Blount, previous to this, went over to the Continent to be baptized; who, after he returned, baptized the rest of the members that were with him.<sup>3</sup> To be orthodox was an important matter in the estimation of men like John Myles, Richard Blount, and others, and to be baptized and received as church members by orthodox persons was equally important in their view, especially in connection with the formation of a church. Indeed, this characteristic is not peculiar to them, nor to their age, for we frequently find the same idea in the history of the Christian Church from the earliest period. After being convinced of their duty to obey Christ in baptism, they were anxious that it should be complete in its administration and obedience; hence they went to the Baptists of the Glass House to secure this. This shows how conscientious they were in the course they pursued. Besides this, the polity of the Baptists was unfamiliar to them; hence it was natural for them to go

to London to learn the word of God more fully in these matters. The fact that the Ilston Church frequently consulted the Glass House on church duties is an additional ratification of this. The truth is, Ilston Church regarded John Myles and Thomas Proud as sent by the Glass House Baptist Church to Wales to preach and administer the ordinance according to the primitive order. Also the Glass House Church looked upon the coming of Myles and Proud to them as a direct answer to their prayers, and as a powerful motive to more diligent perseverance in prayer for additional blessings. His uniting with the Baptists cost John Myles great sacrifices of friendship, position, and wealth, but he gave all up willingly on the altar of obedience, for the sake of keeping the Commandments of God, and the testimony of Jesus Christ, and the pacification of conscience. In his letter to the church at Gelli, dated the 29th of the 11th month, 1649, he speaks thus: "I know that I expect poverty, contempt, reproach, and opposition even from the sons of my mother; but I find that God, to a great measure, has armed me against all these, and I am confident that none of these can move me."

We come now to the establishment of the church at Ilston. After two week absence in London, Myles and Proud returned to Gower under the auspices of the Glass House church. The church reports the history of the first members who united with her as follows:

"It pleased the Lord to give us some signs of his purpose to gather to himself a people to walk in fellowship with them, his servants; but in order that he might be seen more visible in his work, he began with two women, who were baptized about the beginning of the 8th month, 1649; and thus teaching us not to despise the day of small things, nor to judge the work of God according to appearance or human probability. For when these feeble creatures were baptized, there was not a strong probability that one more would be added to us; yet the Lord went on and called four more women before one man offered himself."

From this it seems that about six months passed before any were baptized at Ilston, and that two women by the name of Jane Lloyd and Elizabeth Proud were baptized there about the beginning of October, 1649. These were the first fruits of the labors of Myles and Proud in Gower. From October 1649, to October, 1650, 46 were baptized, making the total number of the church, on the last date, 48. These were not confined to Ilston, but they were scattered over a wide territory and represented many towns and villages. Under the pastorate of Myles, the church increased, in eleven years, to over 250 members. On account of the scattered condition of the church, they decided, at a regular meeting held October 16, 1650, to meet in different places, the whole church to meet at Ilston on the first day of every three weeks to break bread, and that it was to meet on the first two days of the other two weeks the western part in Llanddewi the upper part in Ilston, and the eastern part, that is, the Welsh part, in the house of Sister Jennett Jones Burwick in Llanelli parish. Myles was asked to preach tile first two days of every three weeks, in the afternoon, and Proud the third first day of every three weeks at the public meeting house at Ilston. Here the precedence was given to Myles over Proud. He was chosen as the regular pastor of the church September 29, 1651. Tradition points us to the ruins of an old building in a meadow near the village of Stone Mill, about three-quarters of a mile from Ilston, but in the parish, as the ruins of the old Baptist church. The relationship of John Myles to the parish church at Ilston is less known than his relationship to the Baptist

church of Ilston. He was the pastor of the latter from 1651 until his departure for America about 1660, and he was a member (the first member of it) from its organization in 1649.

We come now to an important question, i. e., was this the first Baptist church in Wales after the Reformation? A twofold answer may be given. If by this question is meant that it was the first church of baptized believers organized in Wales, we answer Yes; but if it means that these were the first Baptists in Wales, say unhesitatingly, No. What is said in the history of Ilston Church is that there was no company or society of prophets holding the doctrines, etc., according to the primitive instruction in all Wales, that they had ever heard of since the time of the apostacy [sic], and that they were the first church of baptized believers. This does not militate against the saying that there were Baptists in Olchon previous to this, for Olchon was in Herefordshire and thus in England, though on the borders of Wales, and the inhabitants were Welsh. There is no certainty that the Baptists of Olchon were ever organized in the same sense that word is understood by other churches. Joshua Thomas was very familiar with the place within the century under consideration, and he says that "Howell Vaughn was there in the time of Charles First,' which must have been previous to 1649. "My opinion is," said he, "that a few earnest people had been in Olchon and vicinity for a long time." And again he says: "On the whole I consider that in this region were the first Reformers the first Dissenters, and the first Baptists in Wales."<sup>4</sup>

This view is in perfect harmony with the quotations from the Ilston Church Book. Ilston was the first society, the first regular church of baptized believers, but there were Baptists in Wales and the border before the year 1649. In accordance with the customs of that age, these worshiped in secret, and sometimes in the parish churches. Immersion was the mode of baptism practiced in the church in Wales until the time of James I; and many persons, like Thomas Llewelyn, of Rhigos, held these sentiments long before the time of John Myles and the Ilston Church; but John Myles has the honor of having established the first church of baptized believers in Wales. Myles was a close communionist, and such were all the churches established by him. His labors were not limited to Ilston; he went to other fields to preach the gospel. This is proved by the following report of the Church of Ilston: "As we are now in a settled condition, Brother Myles went to Breconshire about the middle of the eleventh month, 1649, where he had an opportunity to preach baptism to a congregation of believers meeting in Llanigan; but he did no more this time than to recommend the leadership of the matter to Brethren Prosser, James, and Hughes, who were elders among them, and convinced of their duty respecting baptism, and promised to let them know how the people felt." According to this promise, they sent a letter to Myles and the Ilston Church on the 22d of the same month, containing the required notice. On the 29th of the same month Myles answered the letter of Prosser and Hughes, promising to be at Clifford the first day of the following week to preach baptism, "and if I should meet," said he, "Messrs. Cradoc, Powell, and Jones, I would act towards them as Paul did towards Peter (Gal. 2, 9-14). I would rebuke and oppose them to their faces, because they do not walk properly towards the truth of gospel." The church sent Leyshon Davies with him, and Myles had the pleasure of forming a church there within a month. Soon after this another church was formed in the parish of Llanharan.

Representatives of these churches met in a conference at Ilston, November 6 and 7, 1650. In this Conference, which is the primary foundation of the Welsh Baptist Associations (the Welsh Baptist Association is the first association of this kingdom), it was resolved among other things that Brother Myles should preach in or about Caermarthen the first day of the week every two months. He preached two out of every three days previous to this at Ilston, and now this was added to them. The same provisions were made also with reference to Proud and Davies Gelligaer. A church was soon gathered here again, and March 19, 1651, the representatives of the four churches met at Caermarthen. We have now four churches organized chiefly through the instrumentality of Myles within two years of the time he had united with the Baptists, and another one was soon added to them, which made five churches. This is an evidence of great labor on his part, and great prosperity on the part of God. By this time he was assisted by about twelve preachers who, like himself, were diligent workers.

In 1651 we find him sent as a member in behalf of the Welsh churches to the church in London. It is said that the churches published a "Confession of Faith" compiled by him; but there is no reference to this in the Ilston church book. The great success that followed his labors made him a mark for the arrows of his enemies, and it is said that letters of complaint against him were sent to "London to Major General Harrison, Captain Jones, Vavasor Powell, and others." But they failed to injure him ; because Harrison, who at the time was Governor of Wales, was favorable to him. Notwithstanding all the oppositions he met, he deviated not from what he believed to be the truth respecting baptism and the Lord's supper. Though he stirred such men as Powell, Cradoc, and Jenkin Jones against him, he longed for true liberty to worship God; but he did not have it much longer in Wales.

Soon after the restoration of Charles II, in 1660, the storm became too severe for him, so that he and a few others emigrated to America, where they spent the remainder of their days. The time, place, and circumstances of his immigration are not known now, but it is known that he was in America early in 1663. The Christian people of Wales suffered much after his departure. The first history we have of him in America is that he, with six other brethren, one of whom came with him from Wales, formed a church in Rehoboth.

"And," says Backus,

"in the house of Mr. Butterworth, in Rehoboth in 1663, Elder John Myles, James Brown, Nicholas Tanner, Joseph Carpenter, John Butterworth, Eldad Kingsley, and Benjamin Alby united together in a serious covenant."

This was the first Baptist church in those regions, and for some time they enjoyed peace. But as the apostle of old, troubles awaited Myles everywhere. He kindled the jealousy of the Pedobaptist churches of the colony against him, and, at their encouragement the Civil Court of Plymouth gave its influence against them. John Myles was summoned before the court, and he was fined, July 2, 1667, five pounds; John Brown, five pounds; and Nicholas Tanner, five pounds; for establishing worship without the recommendation of the court to the disturbance of the peace of the place. The judge, Thomas Prince, who also was the governor, said

"And we judge that your remaining in Rehoboth cannot be granted, as it is injurious to the peace of the church in the town; and we therefore command that all persons to whom

it belongs keep entirely away from such a meeting, in such a place or colony within this month. Again, on the condition that they move their congregation to some other place, and that they disturb not the same church in that place, and give us reasonable satisfaction respecting their principles, we know not but that they can have the consent of this Government."

The same persecuting spirit was shown in this sentence that was seen in the treatment of Obadiah Holmes, Clark, and Crandall, in 1651, for presuming to endeavor to establish a Baptist church at Lynn, and that banished Roger Williams to the wilderness. It seems wonderful to us, in this age, that the same men who were persecuted in England, and who fled from persecution to America that they might enjoy liberty to worship God according to the convictions of their consciences, should become the persecutors of those who differed from them in opinion. But such is the influence of every alliance of Church and State; and the Puritans of Plymouth did not escape from the effects of this relationship. This fact will remain as an indelible stain on the character of the Puritans.

It seems that the court was satisfied with their religious sentiments, for, October 30, 1667, the court at Plymouth donated to Myles and his church a piece of land called New Meadow Creek, called at present Barrington, R. I., which was east of Rehoboth. The meeting-house was erected in the part now called Barrington, but the town was built on the other side of the river, where Myles dwelt and was called Swansea, in remembrance of Swansea, Wales. This place soon became an important town. It was a town of Baptists, and was famous for its hospitality. Here, outside of Rehoboth, they dwelt, built, and had the liberty and peace they longed for. Myles preached also at Boston for nearly three years previous to 1669. "The liberty they enjoyed, with a blessing on the ministry of Myles and others, caused," says Backus,

"such increase in members that they agreed, in February, 1667, to divide into two congregations. But in 1678 they rescinded that action and resolved to build a chapel in Boston, leaving the subject of division until they establish an able and sufficient ministry there."

In 1678 Myles confined his ministry to Swansea, where he preached until the time of his death. Myles lived at this time in a house that was near the bridge, that was named after him "Myles Bridge,"<sup>5</sup> and not far from the old meeting house. When the Indian War broke out in 1675, the Indians attacked this town at the time of worship. Many were wounded, one was killed, and much of the town was burnt. Myles' house was made a fortification. The church erected a new house of worship in 1679, and a parsonage was built for Myles about the same time, where he dwelt until the time of his death in 1683. "The learned and godly Myles slept," says Backus, "February 3, 1683, and his name is loved to this day among us." He was at that time about 62 years of age, and had been in the ministry about 38 years, and 34 of them with the Baptists in Wales and America. The place of his burial is not known, said his successor, Thatcher, but he left behind him a character that will be admired as long as the Palmer River flows.

JOHN JONES.

Endnotes

1 John Penry petitioned the Parliament, in 1587, in behalf of poor Wales, fifty-four years before this appeal. He renewed his petition twice in 1558, but to no purpose. It stirred the authorities against him, and in the end it cost him his life.

2 It seems to us that this implies the existence of mixed churches in Wales previous to this, but that this was the first church of baptized believers, etc., that is, unmixed.

3 Evans, English Baptists, vol. II., p. 78.

4 History of the Baptists, pp. 136-137.

5 Hon. Horatio Gates Jones says that "even now, in 1886, it is known as 'Myles Bridge,' and that he has visited the place and crossed the bridge over the Palmer River," which is a branch of Warren River. [Translator.]

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