

The New Inheritance According to Paul

(Originally published in *Bible Review*, 14.3, June 1998. Reproduced by permission of the author.)

The Letter to the Romans re-enacts for all peoples the Israelite Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land — from slavery to freedom.

By N.T. Wright

Most of the major questions about Paul's Letter to the Romans relate to Paul's puzzling sequence of thought. Why, for instance, does Paul have so much to say about Abraham, Israel and the promises of God in chapters 1-4 and 9-11, and so little in chapters 5-8? Is there a logical transition between chapters 1-4, 5-8 and 9-11?

Traditional systematic readings of Romans played off chapters 1-4 (justification) against chapters 5-8 (sanctification), and often left chapters 9-11 to fend for themselves. More recently, in the study of patterns of religion, chapters 1-4 (and, to some extent, 9-11) are seen as juridical, focusing on righteousness or justification, and chapters 5-8 as participationist, focusing on being in Christ. This divide is highlighted by a problem: What link does Paul envisage between belonging by faith to the people of God promised to Abraham (chapters 4 and 9-10) and belonging by baptism to the dying and rising people of God in Christ (chapter 6)?

I have a new proposal to make, which builds on some previous suggestions.^[1] In Romans 4:13 Paul declares that God's promise to Abraham and his family was that they should inherit the world—not, as one might expect, the land of Israel.^[2] The language of inheritance is rooted in the biblical theme of Exodus, including the

promise, and eventual possession, of the land. Paul uses this language to describe his larger vision, of the whole world as the inheritance of Abraham's Jewish-plus-gentile children.

The same theme emerges at the climax of Romans 8, in a context replete with echoes of Exodus. The "children of God" are led by the Spirit, must not go back to slavery, and are declared to be God's heirs, fellow heirs with the Messiah (Romans 8:12-17). Their inheritance will be granted when all of creation experiences its exodus from slavery and shares the freedom of the glory of God's children (Romans 8:18-25). Romans 8 thus explains what Romans 4 had promised.

Does the thought, then, simply leap over the intervening chapters, or is Paul working towards this point throughout? After the summary statement of Romans 5:1-11, which sets out the results of the argument so far (because of Jesus' messianic death and resurrection, all believers are assured of God's love and of the promise of glory), Paul tells an overarching version of the biblical story from Adam to Christ, in which the whole human race prior to the coming of the Messiah is enslaved to sin as Israel was to Egypt. Shockingly, the arrival of the Torah (the Law) (Romans 5:20) only intensified Israel's state of Adamic sinfulness. Within that narrative the problem is, How is liberation then effected?

The answer appears in chapter 6, in which liberation from slavery is a major theme (Romans 6:16-23). Baptism then becomes the Exodus moment, the equivalent of the Red Sea for the renewed people of God. Just as Paul speaks of the Israelites being baptized into Moses when crossing the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:2), so here the whole renewed people is baptized into the Messiah. His dying and rising were the real Passover and Exodus (compare 1 Corinthians 5:7); now all his people are the truly liberated ones.

When the children of Israel came through the Red Sea, they arrived at Sinai and were given the Law. In Romans 7:1-8:11 Paul declares that the renewed people are given the Spirit to do "what the law could not" (Romans 8:3). He argues (through the device of the "I," speaking of himself as the embodiment of Jewish history) that when the Law was originally given Israel recapitulated the sin of Adam (Romans 7:7-12, looking back to Romans 5:20), that in her continuing life under the Torah Israel finds herself simultaneously desiring the good and unable to avoid the buildup of sin, and that Israel, despite her great vocation, remains "in Adam" (Romans 7:1-6, 13-25). God,

however, has dealt with sin and given new life, to those who share the resurrection of Christ through the Spirit (Romans 8:1-11).

Paul is, then, still working within the controlling Exodus story. Baptism corresponds to the Red Sea, the Spirit to the Torah. And Abraham's family, now defined in terms of Jesus' messianic death and resurrection, are therefore on their way to inheriting the promise and must not think of going "back to Egypt," so to speak (Romans 8:12-17). Genesis 15, which Paul expounds in Romans 4, always envisaged Abraham's family passing through slavery to inheritance (Genesis 15:13-21). Romans 5-8, telling the story of how that was achieved, is thus far more tightly integrated into the flow of the letter than is normally supposed.

Many problems remain, which only a commentary could tackle. But four important preliminary results follow.

First, the story of Israel, particularly the Exodus, was far more present in Paul's mind than is usually supposed, informing his reflection on what had happened with the death and resurrection of Israel's Messiah and the gift of the promised Spirit. Second, there is no great gulf between justification and baptism in Paul's thought. Both have to do with the reconstitution of the people of God and their new public definition as a single worldwide family marked out by faith alone. Third, the fact that God's people will inherit the newly liberated creation ought to energize a proper concern for the created order. Fourth, if Romans 5-8 as a whole argues that the true Exodus has come about in the Messiah and by the Spirit, this explains all the more poignantly why Paul must turn at once to the problem of Israel in Romans 9-11.

[1] N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), ch. 10; Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Paul's Use of the Exodus Tradition in Romans and Galatians*, Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 1994 (to be published in the JSNT monograph series by Sheffield Academic Press); Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," in David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds., *Pauline Theology Volume III: Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), pp. 30–67; Frank Thielman, "The Story of Israel and the Theology of Romans 5–8," *Pauline Theology*, pp. 169–195.

[2] For the background, compare with, for example, Sirach 44:21; Jubilees 19:21, looking back to Genesis 15:18; Exodus 23:31; Psalm 72:8; and Zechariah 9, 10.