

The Issue Stated

According to N.T.Wright,¹ Paul, when he was writing Romans 3 – 8, used the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt under Moses to serve as a framework for his argument. In particular, Romans 3 – 4 speaks of the new-covenant deliverance from Egypt, and Romans 6 – 8 speaks of the new-covenant giving of the torah, the law. If we include the first two chapters of Romans, we could summarise the position thus:

Romans 1:18 – 3:20

Egyptian slavery: the believer's ruin in sin
(Eph. 2:1-3)

Romans 3:21 – 5:21

The passover: the believer's redemption, his justification
(1 Cor. 5:7; Gal. 2:15-16)

Romans 6:14 – 8:17

The giving of the torah: the believer under the law of Christ
(John 1:17; Gal. 6:2)

Romans 8:18-27

The wilderness: the believer's sufferings
(1 Pet. 1:6-7)

Romans 8:28-39

Canaan: the believer's glory
(2 Cor. 3:18)²

¹ N.T.Wright: *New Exodus, New Inheritance: The Narrative Substructure of Romans 3 – 8* in Sven K.Soderlund & N.T.Wright (editors): *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honour of Gordon D.Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1999. I will refer to this simply as 'Wright'. When I refer to another of his works, I do so in full.

² Wright thinks far more in terms of the corporate than this, and far less in terms of the individual.

The Issue Stated

You will notice that in the above I have omitted the early part of Romans 6. In Wright's exodus scheme,³ the early part of Romans 6 forms the hinge in the apostle's argument, its pivot, its fulcrum, its biting point, its crux.⁴ In other words, Romans 6 is 'the central or pivotal point or principle on which everything in Paul's argument depends'.⁵ To what is Wright referring? I quote the relevant passage from the apostle:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:1-11).

This, according to Wright, is the crux or turning point in the apostle's argument. As such, of course, it is not only the hinge upon which Paul's argument turns – it is the crucial step in the sinner's experience of redemption. But what, precisely, is that hinge upon which everything turns? Baptism.

Wright:

My initial specific proposal is to explore the possibility that when Paul speaks of baptism in Romans 6 he has in mind the crossing of the Red Sea at the exodus. He makes exactly this connection, of course, in 1 Corinthians 10:2, where it forms an important part of his exhortation

³ It is not only Wright's scheme, of course. He owed his debt to Frank Thielman, Sylvia C.Keesmaat and, above all, to Richard B.Hays (Wright pp27-28).

⁴ I am not saying that Wright used the word 'hinge', but he certainly regarded baptism as the crux.

⁵ See *The Oxford Dictionary*.

The Issue Stated

to the Corinthian church that they should see themselves as the heirs of the scriptural narrative, as God's true-exodus people now engaged in the homeward-bound wilderness journey. 'Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea... Now these things were examples to us, that we might not desire evil as they did' (1 Cor. 10:1-2,6).

And then the hinge itself:

The primary strength of this proposal lies in the sense it makes of Romans 6 as a whole. Baptism, and that which it embodies and symbolises⁶ (the death of the 'old man' and new life in Christ), is here expounded specifically in terms of the slave: 'Thanks be to God that you who once were slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the pattern of teaching to which you were committed, and, being set free from sin, have become enslaved to righteousness' (Rom. 6:17-18).⁷

Here we have it: baptism is the pivot – the pivot in Paul's argument, and, it therefore follows, the pivot in the believer's experience of redemption. Indeed, as Wright explained:

My starting point for this train of thought – the actual point that set me thinking... is the question of the place of baptism, and hence of Romans 6 as a whole, within the argument of the letter.⁸

Baptism is the fulcrum, the hinge or pivot in Paul's argument in this part of his letter to the Romans. In so many words, so said Wright.

And, to a large measure, I agree with him. I think he makes a valid point, and a vital one at that. But! And there is a serious 'but'. It has already surfaced in Wright's use of 'embodies and symbolises'. And that is why I have written.⁹

⁶ Do not miss Wright's 'embodies and symbolises' when talking about baptism, especially the 'embodies': 'baptism, and that which it embodies and symbolises...'. I will have more to say on this. Indeed, it encapsulates my reason for writing this booklet.

⁷ Wright pp28-29.

⁸ Wright p27.

⁹ In fact, I part company with Wright over two main issues. In addition to the question of baptism in this context (Rom. 6:3-4), I disagree with his view of 'justification by faith' (Rom. 3 – 5). These two quarrels are far

The Issue Stated

Before I get to that, however, we need to retrace our steps and think a little more about Wright's claim for the exodus motif in Romans. Is he right? Did Paul use the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt as a framework within which to build his argument when setting out the gospel?

from trivial. On the first, see my *Conversion Ruined: The New Perspective and the Conversion of Sinners*.