

## *How Valid Is the ‘Exodus Theme’ in Romans?*

As I have explained, according to Wright, Paul used the exodus motif as a framework for his argument in Romans 3-8. Is this right?

While it is true that the exodus can be used to illustrate the gospel – and we know that in Romans Paul certainly sets out the gospel (Rom. 1:1-6,15-17; 16:25-27) – Wright has claimed too much in asserting Paul’s dependence on the exodus when writing that letter.<sup>1</sup> The parallel fails badly at certain points. For a start, the wilderness for Israel was a judgement for the Hebrews for their refusal to obey God (Num. 14:29-35; Ezek. 20:13-26; Heb. 3:15-19; 4:6,11); God tested them, humbling them, disciplining them (Deut. 8:2-5), keeping them in the wilderness until all the unbelieving generation (apart from the two spies who did believe – Joshua and Caleb) had died (Num. 26:63-65; 32:11-13). The passage of the Hebrews through the wilderness, therefore, does not represent the believer’s pilgrimage through this life. Nor does Canaan represent heaven; it speaks of the believer’s present rest in Christ (Matt. 11:28-30; Heb. 3:7 – 4:11). Furthermore, I fail to see how Romans 4 – 5 fits the exodus motif; at least, Wright’s use of those chapters does not match the majestic doctrine which the apostle himself laid out. Moreover, if the chronological and historical parallel with the exodus is to be maintained, how can the *hinge* in the apostle’s argument – and, more particularly, the hinge or turning point in the believer’s experience of redemption – come after ‘justification by faith’ (Rom. 3:21 – 5:21)? In short, while there is value in drawing a parallel between the exodus and the believer’s experience of redemption, it is not to be maintained slavishly.

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<sup>1</sup> What is more, we must not forget such passages as Jer. 16:14-15; 23:7-8 in which God promised that he would do something which would make the exodus pale by comparison.

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And there is a more general point, but one which is far from trivial. The New Testament makes it clear that there is a marked contrast between the old and new covenants: 'The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). Just to select two passages out of the many which give us the details of that contrast:

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts! (2 Cor. 3:7-11).

And:

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned'. The sight was so terrifying that Moses said: 'I am trembling with fear'. But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:18-24).

This is but a sample of the abundance of New Testament material that establishes the contrast between the two covenants. See my *Christ is All* for my full argument. All I want to do here is draw attention to the dominant note of contrast: 'You have not... but you have...'. It is not only a question of contrast, of course: the new covenant is superior to the old.

We may summarise the apostle's words in 2 Corinthians 3 in this way:

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The old covenant was to do with the flesh; the new covenant is the covenant of the Holy Spirit (verses 3,6,8).

The old covenant was an outward covenant, written on stone; the new covenant is an inward covenant, written on the heart (verses 2-3,7).

The old covenant killed; it spelled death; the new covenant is life (verses 3,6-7).

The old covenant was deliberately temporary, designed by God to be so; the new covenant is permanent; it remains, it lasts (verses 11,13).

The old covenant had glory, but its glory was lesser and fading; the new covenant has a glory which exceeds, excels, being so much greater than the glory of the old covenant (verses 7-11).<sup>2</sup>

The old covenant condemned; the new covenant is saving (verse 9).

The old covenant spelled bondage; the new covenant brings liberty (verses 12,17).

What a phenomenal series of statements. Breathtaking! And all of a piece with this:

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come – one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law... The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God...

The ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: 'The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying: "Know the Lord", because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will

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<sup>2</sup> Note the apostle's 'deliberate tautology' – without redundancy, of course.

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forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more'. By calling this covenant 'new', he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear...

He sets aside the first to establish the second... The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: 'This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds'. Then he adds: 'Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more' (Heb. 7:11-19; 8:6-13; 10:9-17).

Thus, while the exodus motif is valuable when thinking about personal redemption under the gospel, the comparison must not be stressed to such an extent that it in any way blurs the contrast between the old and new covenants. This is where a great many go wrong. I will return to this vital note.

The parallel between the exodus and Paul's argument in Romans breaks down in yet another way. In the opening verses of Romans 6, Paul is not moving his argument on sequentially; he is not setting out the next step in his discourse or in the believer's experience. Rather, in the first place, he is facing up to and dealing with a serious objection to what he has already said.

What is this objection? Grace is dynamite, especially in its freeness! It is the very freeness of God's grace in redemption that makes it so potent. Potent for what? Surely, says, the objector, if a believer really grasps the freeness of God's grace – as you, Paul, have set it out – nothing will prevent him from sinning with impunity. Indeed, because God is so gracious, the believer might even argue that the more he sins, the more he can experience God's grace, and the more he can glorify God in the exercise of his grace towards him: 'What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?' In other words, the gospel, the free grace of God, preached in the way Paul did, can only encourage antinomianism.<sup>3</sup> That is the objection.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> An antinomian is, literally, one who is against law; he is lawless; he does what he wants. Whether the law of Moses, or any other law, the real antinomian has no regard for it whatsoever. Antinomianism, proper, is an abomination, utterly contrary to the gospel. Sadly, however, 'antinomianism' has become a theological swear-word, remarkably elastic – a proper Humpty-Dumpty word – so that it has come to mean whatever

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Let us remind ourselves of the freeness of the grace of God in the gospel, as the apostle sets it out:

A righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe... and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus... God demonstrate[s] his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law... There is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith... If... Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God. What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'. Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness... Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!... It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith... Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all... The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand... You see, at just the right time, when

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its user wants it to mean. As such, it has proved a handy weapon for those who want to dismiss an opponent without weighing his arguments.

<sup>4</sup> From this we learn that the possibility of such a charge is a litmus test for preachers. Unless such a charge can be made against our preaching, we are not preaching the gospel as the apostle did. We are more than likely to be preaching law in some form or another. No law preacher could ever be accused of encouraging antinomianism or lawlessness.

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we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!... Just as through the disobedience of the one man [Adam] the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man [Christ] the many will be made righteous. The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 3:21 – 5:21).

It is this freeness – the freeness which is so heavily stressed by the apostle – that provokes the objection.

This freeness of the grace of God in the gospel is so far-reaching, I cannot help exploring it a little more. I do so by taking just one aspect of Paul's teaching in the above:

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! (Rom. 5:9).

Look at what the apostle teaches us here. We have been justified by Christ's blood. In saying this, of course, Paul was building on what he has already set out, starting from Romans 1:18. As sinners, we are under the wrath of God. There is nothing that we can do, no rite that we can observe, no duty that we can fulfil, that will deliver us from that wrath. But Christ has come and shed his blood to appease the wrath of God, appease it by bearing it in himself. And by faith in Christ, trust in Christ, we are released from condemnation, and clothed with Christ's righteousness. In a word, we are justified and have peace with God. Hence, the apostle says: 'We have now been justified by [Christ's] blood' (Rom. 5:9).

Now that, in itself, speaks of freeness. We are justified, not by our works, but by Christ's sacrifice. But Paul has not finished. In fact, he does not say: 'We have now been justified by [Christ's] blood'. This is what he actually says: '*Since* we have now been justified by [Christ's] blood'. Indeed, he declares: '*Since* we have

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now been justified by [Christ's] blood, *how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!*'

What point am I making? Just this: justification is utterly free to the sinner; it cost the Saviour his all, but it is utterly free to the sinner. The truth is, justification by sovereign grace is far more free, and far more extensive, than we could possibly imagine. 'How much more' – to use the apostle's words – how much richer, how much freer, it is than we dare to think! If we are in Christ, if we are trusting Christ, we are not only justified, but *whatever happens, we shall be delivered from God's wrath through Christ!*

Reader, try to let that sink in! No matter what happens – by way of trial, sin or failure (Rom. 5:3-8) – we who are in Christ by faith, cannot, will not, ever come under the wrath of God. Once we are in Christ, there is no possibility whatsoever that we shall ever be condemned:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit...<sup>5</sup> And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us (Rom. 8:1-4,28-34).

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<sup>5</sup> Do not misread the apostle: those 'who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit' are those who are not in the flesh, not in Adam, but in the Spirit, in Christ; in other words, they are believers, saints, the children of God.

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*This* is the measure of the freeness and fullness of the grace of God in Christ in the gospel: we cannot sin ourselves out of Christ and into condemnation; no accusation can ever be laid against us.<sup>6</sup>

To say such things is to set alarm bells ringing. So much so, many will be only too quick to retort: 'Antinomianism!'

Precisely! That is just what happened here. This is the self-same objection which the apostle himself takes up. The very freeness of grace *must* lead to the objection that it will produce antinomianism.

So, how does Paul counter the objection? Does he back off? Not at all! Rather, he recapitulates his doctrine. Actually, he does more: he drives it home even harder. As I have just shown from Romans 8, the apostle can hardly find words sufficient to set out the wonder of God's free grace to sinners in Christ by his Spirit. And it is in the opening of his battery that he makes the glorious declaration which underlies our discussion here:

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

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<sup>6</sup> Not long after I was converted, a preacher, addressing us – a group of young people – asked us (rhetorically) what would happen if we were knocked down by a bus and died before we had time to confess the sins we had committed since last we confessed them. No doubt he was trying to lead us into some sort of popery. At the time, I was very young in the faith, having had little or no experience of public speaking. If it happened today, I would immediately get to my feet and say something like: 'My sins are not forgiven on the basis of my confessions and prayers! Jesus died, Jesus lives, and Jesus ever lives to make intercession for me (Rom. 8:33-39; Heb. 7:25; 10:14-18). Horatio G. Spafford got it right: "My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought! / My sins, not in part but the whole [all my sins – past, present and future], / Are nailed to his cross, and I bear them no more, / Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!'"'. And so on!



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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).

Having made that statement, the apostle then moves immediately into making application of his doctrine by way of command to the believer:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! (Rom. 6:12-15).

And so Paul continues, arguing that the believer is free from sin, free from law and free from death, and illustrating it by the underlying principles of slavery and marriage (Rom. 6:16 – 7:6).

This is the first point about Romans 6. The opening of this chapter is not, primarily, a development of the apostle's argument. Rather, it marks a recapitulation and reinforcement of his doctrine in order to answer an objection. And linked with this, having recapped his doctrine, and re-stated it even more powerfully, Paul then makes application of the truth to the believer's sanctification.

Having said all that, however, the exodus outline does highlight some important aspects of the gospel. So much so (but bearing in mind the objection I have already flagged regarding his 'embodies and symbolises'), I fully accept Wright's summary of this portion of Romans – even to the extent of wishing I had penned it myself:

We could summarise the narrative sequence as follows: those who were enslaved in the 'Egypt' of sin... have been set free by the 'Red Sea' event of baptism, since in baptism they are joined to the Messiah, whose death and resurrection are accounted as theirs. They are now given as their guide... the Spirit, so that the Mosaic covenant has been

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replaced, as Jeremiah and Ezekiel said it would be, with the covenant written on the hearts of God's people by God's own Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Excellent – as long as, I say again, we do not forget my objection over 'embodies and symbolises'.

Indeed, I would strengthen the parallel between the exodus and the gospel by drawing on two other episodes recorded in the biblical account of the exodus, two incidents which form links between the passover in Egypt and the crossing of the Jordan.

Take the passover:

When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony [of the passover]. And when your children ask you: 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them: 'It is the passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians' (Ex. 12:25-27) see also Ex. 10:2; 13:8,14-15; Deut. 32:7; Ps. 78:6).

Now the crossing of the Jordan:

When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: 'Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight'. So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them: 'Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you: "What do these stones mean?" tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel for ever'. So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down. Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day... And Joshua set

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<sup>7</sup> Wright p29.

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up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites: 'In the future when your descendants ask their fathers: "What do these stones mean?" tell them: "Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground". For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God' (Josh. 4:1-9,20-24).

What am I talking about? Notice the two questions, questions which would be asked in years to come by the children (and later descendants) of those who actually experienced the first passover and those who crossed the Jordan: 'What do you mean by this service?' and 'What do you mean by these stones?' That's the first link. Now look at the dates. The passover lamb had to be selected for the passover sacrifice, at the start of the process of deliverance, on the tenth day of the first month: 'This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household' (Ex. 12:2-3). And what about the crossing of the Jordan – that is, the completion of the deliverance? 'On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho' (Josh. 4:19). The tenth day of the first month in both cases. Remarkable! None of this was an accident. By the memorials, by the questions and by the dates, God was teaching the Israelites that their leaving Egypt and their entering Canaan were one and the same event in his eyes.

Now think about the new-covenant equivalent of all this. The sinner has to be brought out of Adam and brought into Christ; out of the flesh, into the Spirit; out of Satan's domain, into Christ's kingdom (Col. 1:13); out of bondage, into liberty; out of slavery, into rest. Notice how, in Romans 6:3-4, Paul telescopes the two events – the 'out of' and the 'into' – into one, speaking of believers in their dying with Christ and their rising with Christ. Actually, the apostle is clearly reminding them of what they already know, taking it for granted, arguing on that basis:

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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).

The point is, the two aspects or parts to the sinner's experience of redemption – being taken out of Adam, and being brought into Christ; out of the flesh, into Christ; his death with Christ, and his resurrection with Christ – are one event. There is no 'intermediate' or 'limbo' state. It is either/or, mutually exclusive: all men are either in Adam or in Christ. And if we are in Christ, we are in him, in his death and resurrection, and, although the apostle does not state it here, we are with Christ in his ascension into heaven, seated with him in glory even now (Eph. 1:3; 2:6).

The physical leaving of the Hebrews from Egypt and their physical entering into Canaan could not have been one event, literally speaking, of course, but if they had not failed at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran (Num. 13 – 14), then, within the shortest possible time of their exodus from Egypt, the Hebrews would have entered the promised land. This was always God's purpose. As God had promised Abram, centuries before, when making his covenant with him:

Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions... In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure... To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates – the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites,

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Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites (Gen. 15:13-21; see also Gen. 17:5-8; Acts 7:6).

As God promised: they will come out, and they will go in. And God kept his word – to the very day (Ex. 12:40-41; Gal. 3:17). If Israel had trusted God, obeyed his word, they would have come out of slavery into rest in virtually one step.

In short, the exodus does illustrate the gospel, and, in particular, the believer's experience of redemption in Christ. And baptism is the pivot or hinge in that new-covenant experience of the believer.