



Tom Holland  
*Jesus and the Exodus:*  
*Discovering the Key that Unlocks Scripture*  
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*(The following review is based on a free copy of the draft manuscript received from the publisher without any expectation of a favourable review. Matters of copy editing within the manuscript I have left unaddressed, assured that they have been corrected in the final manuscript. Page references accurately reflect the draft manuscript. TJRT.)*

Dr. Tom Holland, Senior Research Fellow at Union School of Theology, Bridgend, Wales, UK, has written an engaging and insightful theological biography, introducing his readers to Paschal New Exodus Theology and explaining how and why he came to espouse it.

Godly biopics are driven not by ego but by the thrill of God's leading into his truth, and by the profound truths uncovered or recovered thereby. They remind us of Christ's promise that the Spirit of truth would guide his people (the apostles in the context) into all truth (Jn 16:13), and afford the reader joy in following the author more deeply into God's Word. Dr. Holland's narrative certainly has much of that effect. He communicates well the labour of love energized by and consistent with the leading of the Spirit, and leaves the reader with a number of "Aha" moments which are to the praise of God and the thrill of the soul.

It is against this backdrop of appreciation that I offer this review of Dr. Holland's latest contribution to Paschal New Exodus Theology. It is incumbent especially on Christian reviewers to offer thoughtful and balanced feedback, treating others how we would like to be treated ourselves, not least because reviewers unlike authors have less accountability to the reading public.

### **An overview**

In five sections, Dr. Holland leads his readers from his introduction to God's Word as a new convert to Christ, through his grappling with its interpretation (eschewing the view that only high academics can understand it), to his main focus on the apostle Paul as a major lens through which to examine the ministry and message of Jesus. Once engaged with the apostle, Dr. Holland proceeds to narrate his struggles as a pastor in expounding the real Paul underlying Western individualistic interpretations of his corpus. At times, we are left to pity Pastor Holland's

original hearers, yet not too much so, for they had a front-row view of their pastor's love for God and his Word in wrestling his way through Romans. Whatever hermeneutic revisions were lost on them, they surely felt their pastor's infectious pursuit of a right understanding of Holy Writ.

These five decades later, Dr. Holland's thinking, by his own admission, has matured into a Paschal New Exodus Theology. Essential to it is his recognition of the importance of the Hebraic solidarity of God's people, and of the exodus motif running through their historical progression. These two factors Dr. Holland understands to be key to understanding Scripture. He argues that New Exodus Theology rests on three exoduses (literally, "departures") identifiable in Scripture: the Egyptian Exodus, the Babylon Exodus, and the New Exodus:

- The *Egyptian Exodus* presumed the guilt of Israel from under the prior sway of Egyptian idolatry. It was occasioned by Moses, God's chosen redeemer, and coincided with the Passover. Central to it was the sacrifice of the lamb for the atonement and deliverance of the firstborn. Altogether, the Exodus procured Israel's covenant relationship to God, which the Hebrew Scriptures variously depict as a marriage, a parent-child relationship, and so forth. This exodus serves as the template for the subsequent exoduses.
- The *Babylonian Exodus* was likewise promised, and was necessitated by the repeated unfaithfulness of God's people. They disgraced God before the nations and were thus sent into exile. However, the Lord's suffering servant would atone for their sins and procure their deliverance. The servant pointed thereby to the ultimate deliverance of the *New Exodus*.
- The *New Exodus* was heralded by the prophets, climactically by John the Baptist who was the last prophet of the old covenant era. He pointed to Jesus—both a greater deliverer than Moses and the servant of the Lord—whose sufferings actually rather than typically secured the new exodus. During the week of his passion he not only fulfilled the Passover but did what otherwise would have been blasphemous: He reinterpreted the Passover in light of his imminent death on the cross. It would be *his* broken body and shed blood rather than the lamb's which would atone for the sins of God's people and deliver them from their enslavement to sin. Thereby, the Messiah fulfilled the promises of the first two exoduses (2 Cor. 1:20).

Inevitably, Dr. Holland goes into much greater detail, not only to unpack New Exodus Theology but to argue that these three exoduses in the history

of redemption form *the* hermeneutical key for unlocking both Paul's thought and the entire canon of Scripture:

Isaiah had written of God's coming judgement on Israel and His promise to her was of a Second Exodus from Babylon (Isa. 11:11-12) that would be a copy of the First Exodus from Egypt. But an important difference was that in the Babylonian Exodus, God would include Gentiles from the surrounding nations and they would be a true part of this new covenant community [the new exodus] without surrendering their national identity or having to be circumcised (Isa. 19:18-24) [p. 38].

Indeed, the three Exoduses constitute both *the unfolding* and *the framework* of the gospel. In other words, they lead up to the gospel, shaping its content by their repeated emphases on rebellion, exile, and redemption. Each time the pattern recurs there is an increase of detail about these emphases. This is consistent with the progress of revelation, culminating as it does in Christ and his gospel. Accordingly, by the time we get to the Bible's third exodus, the New Testament apostles "collect all the lessons, imagery, and promises of the two Old Testament Exoduses to explain what Jesus has achieved through His death and resurrection." Dr. Holland thus continues, "If we fail to understand how the first two Exoduses provide the details used to reveal the meaning of this third Exodus, which I will call the New Exodus, then we will miss vitally important details that will help us understand its incredible richness" (p. 39; cf., pp. 72-73). Accordingly, in the New Exodus Theology the exodus motif is the *sine qua non* of both the *historia* and *ordo salutis*. The one motif maintains inseparably both such soteriological perspectives, which we label in English understand the history and application of salvation.

Dr. Holland believes there to be manifold significance in recognizing the three exoduses:

First, New Exodus Theology encourages us to dig deeper into Scripture for the patterns found therein. It calls us to resist skating across Holy Scripture, importing into our expositions eisegetical or extra-biblical ideas. Dr. Holland especially objects to the superimposing of Greco-Roman ideas onto Paul's use of the Hebrew Scriptures. He rightly argues that our systems of theology should emerge from Scripture, displaying, as I like to say, a high view *and* a high use of Scripture. Good, faithful folk, Godly scholars even, often illustrate that the former does not guarantee the latter.

Second, New Exodus Theology safeguards the necessity of the gospel. We need God's grace in Christ not because shifting extra-biblical views of what is right and wrong tell us that we need it (Dr. Holland notes how responses

to an Augustinian view of sex have differed over time, p. 57), but because the Ten Commandments first given by God to the children of Israel perpetually declare that we have sinned against God and displeased him.

Third, New Exodus Theology similarly safeguards Paul from the accusation that he conflated the content of the gospel of our Lord Jesus with religious ideas taken from Greek or Roman culture (p. 47). Dr. Holland mentions Greek dualism, which assumes the physical (e.g., the flesh) to be evil, and the spiritual to be good [p. 63]). The former is not so, the latter need not be so. New Exodus Theology debunks, then, the idea that Paul, by an admixture of the Hebraic and Greco-Roman ideas, effectively created his own Christian gospel. Rather, the gospel he preached and penned is traceable through the series of Exoduses, culminating in the New Exodus, which, following on climactically from the Egyptian and Babylonian Exoduses, announced the fulfillment of the gospel anticipated from old covenant times. That fulfillment has involved the creation of a new covenant community in which Jews and Gentiles, resting on the death and resurrection of Christ, possess equal footing in the new Israel, which is why there is to be no enforced circumcision of Gentile believers nor imposition on them of the now fulfilled ceremonial law. Believing Jews and Gentiles have parity within the new community on the sole basis of God's grace in Christ.

Fourth, New Exodus Theology, by focusing on the solidarity of God's people does indeed counter the lopsided individualism of much Western theology. This is significant since, soteriologically, our Protestant confessions have emphasized the *ordo salutis* (order of personal salvation) more than the *historia salutis* (the history of the salvation of all God's people)—a perspective impacting expositions of Romans as far back as Luther's. There is ample biblical proof for this solidarity. It predates Abraham the father of Israel, and is traceable back to Adam's fatherhood of the human race. Had he obeyed, our race would have been confirmed within the kingdom of God, yet his disobedience occasioned our race's transfer into the kingdom of Satan. Likewise, our salvation, narrated in terms of the Exodus stories is, writes Dr. Holland, not primarily about individuals but about the the redemption of communities (p. 81).

### ***An interaction***

Clearly, I am sympathetic to Dr. Holland's proposal. Reflecting *spiritually*, any theology arising from love for God and taking us deeper into Scripture has the right starting point and intention and warrants a hearing. Reflecting *personally*, my own biblical and theological research warms me

to Dr. Holland's desire to set doctrinal discussion in the context of the history of redemption and of progressive revelation. Reflecting *practically*, it needs to be said that what follows is a first and not a last think-through of New Exodus Theology. My preliminary comments are open to revision, not only because more time is needed to digest Dr. Holland's proposal but because his other volumes may go some way to answer some of the queries raised here.

Confessing these provisos, and affirming the prominence and coherence of the three exoduses in Scripture, and the need to balance out the corporate and the individual appropriation of Scripture, a number of questions come to mind.

First, I question whether Dr. Holland's contribution is as *sui generis* as he believes. It seems to me that his emphasis on the historical and corporate progression of theology is a product and part of a re-emergence of biblical-theological interest stretching back to the late nineteenth century. Of ground-breaking significance is Geerhardus Vos' exposition of Scripture as a history of redemption. This, in turn, impacted John Murray's seminal endeavor to increase biblical-theological considerations in the shaping of systematic theology. By the mid-twentieth century there flowered a parallel development via the renaissance in Calvin studies.<sup>1</sup> While not void of Aristotelian categories of cause and effect, Calvin points us back to the salvation-historical contextualization of soteriology and challenges more recent highly-logicized layouts of the *ordo salutis*. This quiet revolution in the fields of, first, biblical theology and, increasingly, systematic theology, suggests that while Dr. Holland is aligned with and attuned to the Spirit's deepening of the church's knowledge of God's Word, his contribution, at least in its methodology and preference for solidarity over individualism, is not so novel nowadays.

Second, I ponder the claim that the biblical focus on exodus "really is the most important key to a proper understanding of the New Testament" (p. 45). It is hard to argue against that historically. The Exoduses form the spine of the unfolding of redemptive history. Yet, theologically, there is a plethora of motifs running through the progress of revelation that culminate in the New Testament and help us to come to a proper understanding of the New Testament. The most important keys have

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed account of this trajectory, see Tim J. R. Trumper, "John Frame's Methodology: A Case Study in Constructive Calvinism," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*. Edited by John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 145–172.

traditionally been understood to be *kingdom* and *covenant*. See, for instance, Herman Ridderbos' *The Coming of the Kingdom*. That said, perhaps we are dealing here with semantics. On the one hand, covenant and kingdom could be said to rest on the historical realities of the exoduses; on the other hand, we could say that the exoduses provide the historical backdrop of the kingdom of heaven and the new covenant. Yet, Dr. Holland goes further. By using the nomenclature "Paschal Exodus Theology," he ties together historical realities of the repeated exoduses with their content (rebellion, exile, and redemption) to argue that the Exodus motif is, as an overarching theological construct, *the* key to unlock the New Testament. Speaking personally, I am not yet ready to say that we need to identify one particular key for understanding the New Testament. It could well be the most fundamental running through other models such as adoption (Gal. 3:23f.; Rom. 9:4) — which, perhaps, is what Dr. Holland means — but we would not want to downplay the plethora of other motifs running through the history of redemption.

Third, while there has been a dearth of independent thinkers in the confessional Reformed tradition—we are better these days regurgitating our theology than renewing it biblically (a difference between what I call the constructive and orthodox Reformed)—there are nevertheless dangers to avoid in articulating fresh constructs. One such danger is that of reading all of Scripture through the construct we have unearthed. For Professors John Frame and Vern Poythress there is the temptation of turning multiperspectivalism into a rigid triperspectivalism, seeing everything in terms of normative, situational, and existential perspectives. Indeed, John Frame has openly acknowledged a certain danger in this regard, which is why I feel free to mention him. For Dr. Holland, the danger is of seeing the Exodus motif everywhere. Rigorous exegesis must always lead the way, for the imposition of biblical-theological constructs on the texts of Scripture is no more helpful or welcome than the imposition of those which are systematic-theological. In this regard, I find myself enthralled by some of Dr. Holland's insights while yet feeling in certain instances that the construct runs the show (such as in his treatment of Romans 7).

Fourth, following others before him (e.g., Herman Ridderbos and James Scott), Dr. Holland rightly sees Paul as a product of his Hebrew background, being steeped in its Scripture, culture, and thought. His conversion did not eradicate this influence on him. Accordingly, Dr. Holland offers a worthy corrective to those common endeavors to ascertain whether, in any given model or passage, Paul was under Semitic, Greek, and/or Roman influences. Fundamentally, he was a *Hebrew* Christian. No argument there!

We may ask, however, whether the apostle was entirely immune from the Greco-Roman world in which he lived. Dr. Holland implies that he was:

. . . I concluded that a man with such an attitude, leaving such lofty Jewish traditions, is never going to seek help from the writings of Jesus and the Exodus the Greco/Roman world nor, for that matter, from the Jewish world which opposed Christ and the message of His death as the only source of salvation. The closer I examined the extra-biblical material that Paul was supposed to have used to build his theology, the more I realized he used none at all! All the evidence shows that he was controlled by the scriptures he believed his God had inspired [pp. 48-49].

We need not buy into the idea that Paul built his theology on extra-biblical material from the surrounding cultures to question the claim that Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, used none of what he knew from the Greco-Roman world he inhabited. After all, he wrote in Greek and was a Roman citizen. Consider, for example, his unique doctrine of adoption:

- Paul is the only author of Scripture to use the Greek term *huiiothesia* (the sole term in Scripture for the practice of adoption), and yet the social practice of adoption was unknown in Hebrew or Jewish culture.
- While utilizing the Greek term to construct his model of adoption, he packs the term *huiiothesia* with content drawn from the Hebrew Scripture's sonship tradition.
- Paul only drew on his adoption model when writing to Christians in Rome or under Roman rule (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:4-7; Eph. 1:4-5). Significantly, his readers were familiar with two processes of adoption: *adrogatio* and *adoptio*.
- Paul used his adoption model not only to speak of God's grace in salvation but to promote the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers within the one household of God (Eph. 2:19). It was helpful to his pursuit, then, to combine his fresh reading of the Hebrew sonship tradition with subtle allusions to Roman adoption. Had Paul alluded solely to the former he would have lost his Gentile readers; had he been more explicit about the latter he would have risked turning away his Jewish readers.

In short, then, Dr. Holland is exactly right to push back against those scholars who begin their theologizing by reading Greek and Roman influences into Paul's thought. Such an approach threatens to ignore the fundamental influence of the Hebrew Scriptures on the apostle and on the New Testament in general, and to sever the New Testament from the Old. Yet, to run close to denying all other influences on Paul's thought amid the triadic cultural context of the Mediterranean basin strikes this reviewer as

unrealistic and lacking corroboration from the Pauline corpus. The example of the adoption model teaches us that while the apostle's Hebrew context was fundamental to his worldview (now focused on the person and work of the Messiah), he did in fact make use of Greco-Roman influences (consider also the illustrations Dr. Holland challenges on p. 51). Paul did so not to formulate an idiosyncratic gospel but to pursue the unity of the new Israel in Christ and to declare in a bridge-building manner the one-and-only gospel of Christ to the pagan world of the first-century A.D.

Fifth and related, Dr. Holland's Paschal New Exodus Theology does sterling work in showing the continuity of Scripture in both its historical narrative and Exodus motif. It is perplexing, then, that he views the church as having been born in New rather than Old Testament times. One would have thought that his consistent emphasis on the solidarity of God's people would lead him toward a classic Reformed understanding of the oneness of the church throughout the Old and New Testaments. On this understanding, the Old Testament narrates the church in her infancy and the New Testament the church come of age (e.g., Gal. 3:23-4:7). Instead, Dr. Holland asserts the unity of Scripture when it comes to Paul's Jewish heritage but unwittingly challenges it when it comes to the existence of the church. In effect, what he gives with one hand he takes away with the other:

My studies have persuaded me that Paul never abandoned his Jewish heritage, even after his acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. His heritage was rooted in the Jewish scriptures and nothing else. The scriptures remained his authority throughout his life as a servant of Christ. They were the foundation of his evangelism and teaching to *the infant church* [italics inserted, p. 80].

This is not a matter of heterodoxy, but rather, to this reviewer, an unwitting inconsistency (admittedly, too often found among those professing to be classically/confessionally Reformed). I mention it here, only because Dr. Holland appears to bring together the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures only then to subdivide them once more.

### ***A Conclusion***

Were this a more exegetically-driven review, we would go much further, interacting with particular passages, both their wonderful insights (especially in regard to the Passover) and questionable interpretations (perhaps most of all in relation to Rom. 7). However, as a preliminary and generalist (methodological) review, I laud Dr. Holland for his willingness to follow the Holy Scriptures where they have led him, for his patience amid

our hasty age in painstakingly developing his thought, and for his courage in challenging a lingering and, in some ways, a returning hyper-logicized approach to theology. With the reappearance of many theological classics, too many of the faithful in evangelical, conservative, Reformed circles find it safer simply to repeat what they read than to think matters through biblically and personally. Not so, Dr. Holland. His is a refreshing voice.

That said, the caveats mentioned, while not undercutting the undeniable pluses of a Paschal New Exodus Theology, do seek to safeguard its *gravitas* from overstatement. Amid the necessity of fresh biblical dogmatics, we need the redemptive-historical context of doctrine *and* its propositional content; its communal *and* individual application to the church and the individual believer, respectively; the esteeming of the Hebraic origins of the faith *and* its relevance to ministry in a pagan world. In welcoming, then, Dr. Holland's creative orthodoxy, I would be remiss not to warn against his Paschal New Exodus Theology falling foul of the same criticism leveled against N.T. Wright's version of the new perspective on Paul; namely, that it doesn't tell a dying man how he can be right with God. While the Paschal New Exodus Theology is sound on the gospel, Dr. Holland will want to ensure that its historical and the communal aspects don't absorb the gospel punchlines found in the doctrinal and individual application of the good news. Dr. Holland is too sound and pastoral a brother to permit this, and in a private preview of this review answers that his differences with N. T. Wright are laid out in his volume *Tom Wright and the Search for Truth: A Theological Evaluation* (London: Apiary Publishing, 2017, 247–418, especially). That is just as well, for the creatively orthodox have their followers to educate and to forewarn. Emphasizing the aforementioned balances would greatly help in this regard. In the meantime, it is a pleasure to commend this theological biopic to thoughtful students of Scripture and lovers of the gospel.

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