

HEBREWS *for* EVERYONE

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

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Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

*For
Robert and Leah
friends, neighbours, companions on the way*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word

INTRODUCTION

in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what's going on.

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have tried, naturally, to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

The letter to the Hebrews is one of the most bracing and challenging writings in the New Testament. People often find it a bit difficult, because it uses ideas that are strange to us. But, like meeting a new friend, we will find as we get to know it that it is full of interest and delight, with a powerful message that comes home to today's and tomorrow's church as much as it did to yesterday's. So here it is: Hebrews for everyone!

Tom Wright

HEBREWS 1.1–5

God's One and Only Son

¹In many ways and by many means God spoke in ancient times to our ancestors in the prophets; ²but at the end of these days he spoke to us in a son.

He appointed this son to be heir of all things;
through him, in addition, he created the worlds.

³He is the shining reflection of God's own glory,
the precise expression of his own very being;
he sustains all things through his powerful word.
He accomplished the cleansing needed for sins,
and sat down at the right of the Majesty Supreme.

⁴See how much greater he is than the angels:
the name he is granted is finer than theirs.

⁵For to which angel did God ever say, 'You are my son, today I became your father'? Or, again, 'I will be his father, and he will be my son'?

I had an email this morning from an old friend in another part of the world. He had heard that my daughter was getting married, and in congratulating me he brought me up to date on the progress of his own daughter. Now in her teens, she was wearing seven earrings, bright purple hair, and rings in her lip and navel as well. He told me all this as though seeking my sympathy for his plight, but underneath that I heard a very different note: pride and delight. I well remembered my friend's own teenage years: a typical rebel, with long hair, loud music, a cigarette hanging from his lip . . . clearly his daughter was (as we say) a chip off the old block. Looking at her, he could see his own true self. His character – or one aspect of it, at least – was shining out of her.

This is a cheerful and low-grade example of the sublime and exalted point which the letter to the Hebrews offers as its opening description of God and his only son. The son is 'the shining reflection of God's own glory'; he is 'the precise expression of [God's] own very being'. He is, dare we say, not just a chip off the old block – as though there might be many such people, perfectly reflecting God's own inner being – but the unique son. Look at him, and it's like looking in a mirror at God himself. His character is exactly reproduced, plain to see.

Actually, the word used for 'precise expression' here is the Greek word *character*, the origin of our apparently identical English word. But this is an interesting word in both Greek and in English. When we talk about the 'characters' in a play, and when we talk about the 'characters' of an alphabet (the Hebrew 'characters', say, or the Japanese), what have the two got in common? Where does the idea begin?

At the bottom of it all, in the ancient world, lies the idea of engraving, or of stamping soft or hot metal with a pattern which the metal will then continue to bear. Though the ancient world didn't have printing presses such as we have had since William Caxton in the fifteenth century, it had early equivalents that were used, particularly, for making coins. The emperor would employ an engraver who carved the royal portrait, and suitable words or abbreviations, on a stamp, or die, made of hard metal. The engraver used the stamp to make a coin, so that the coin gave the *exact impression*, or indeed expression, of what was on the stamp.

The word *character* in ancient Greek was widely used to mean just that: the accurate impression left by the stamp on the coin. From there it came to mean both the individual letters that could be produced by this method (hence the 'characters' of a language) and the 'character', in the broader sense, of a person or thing: the sort of person, the 'type' if you like (think about that word, too). And this is what our writer is saying about Jesus. It is as though the exact imprint of the father's very nature and glory has been precisely reproduced in the soft metal of the son's human nature. Now it is there for all the world to see.

Stay with the image of the emperor and his engraver a moment longer, and think about the opening two verses of this remarkable letter. Supposing the emperor had been wanting for a long time to tell his subjects who he was, to give them a good idea of his character. And supposing the metal stamp, or die, hadn't been invented yet. The emperor would only be able to send out drawings or sketches, which might tell people something but wouldn't give them the full picture. Then, at last, the reality: hard metal on soft, original picture exactly reproduced. Yes, says the writer: God had for a long time been sending advance sketches of himself to his people, but now he's given us his exact portrait.

With this idea, written as a grand and rather formal opening to the letter, the writer invites us to look at the whole sweep of biblical history and see it coming to a climax in Jesus. (Unlike the letters of Paul, this one doesn't tell us who it's from or who it's intended for, which is frustrating at one level but shouldn't spoil our enjoyment of its marvellous and rich thought.) Look back at the great prophets: Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Elijah, and then of course the writing prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest. Our author would have included David in the list as well, as we can see from the way he quotes the Psalms.

This opening sentence isn't just a rhetorical flourish. It tells us clearly how the argument of the whole letter is going to run. Again and again we start with a passage from the Old Testament, and the writer shows us how it points forwards to something yet to come. Again and again

the ‘something’ it points forwards to turns out to be Jesus – Jesus, as in this passage, as God’s unique son, the one who has dealt with sins fully and finally, the one who now rules at God’s right hand, the one to whom even angels bow in submission.

The next passage will develop this last point more fully. But we should notice, before we go any further, that the passages our writer quotes in verse 5 are two of the Old Testament passages the early Christians used most frequently when they were struggling to say what had to be said about Jesus. Psalm 2.7 and 2 Samuel 7.14 both speak of the **Messiah**, the ultimate **son of David**, as God’s own special son. Like all the early Christians, the writer of this letter begins his thinking with the belief that Jesus was and is the Messiah, Israel’s true king. Everything else follows from that.

So, though we don’t know who the author of this letter was, we know something even more important about him. Right from the start, he has his eyes fixed on Jesus; at the end of the letter, when he draws everything together, he urges us to have our eyes fixed on him, too (12.2; 13.8). Are you ready for the challenge?

HEBREWS 1.6–14

The Messiah Is Superior to Angels

⁶Again, when God brings the firstborn son into the world, he says,

Let all God’s angels worship him.

⁷In relation to the angels, this is what it says:

God makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire.

⁸In relation to the son, however, it says,

Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever;
the sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of your kingdom;

⁹you loved justice and hated lawlessness,
therefore God, your God, anointed you with the oil of gladness,
as superior to your comrades.

¹⁰And, again:

You established the earth, O Lord, from the beginning;
and the heavens are the works of your hands;

¹¹they will be destroyed, but you will remain;
all of them will grow old like clothing,

¹²you will roll them up like a cloak,
and they will be changed like clothing.

But you are the same, and your years will never give out.

¹³But to which of the angels did God ever say,

Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies a stool for your feet?

¹⁴Must we not say, then, that the angels are all servant spirits, sent to act on behalf of those who are to inherit salvation?

It was Christmas again, and we spent what seemed like a very long time not just buying presents but wrapping them up. Half the fun of Christmas morning, after all, is the exciting packages in glittering wrapping, with ribbons and bows, all telling you something about how wonderful the present itself will be.

But that Christmas one of the children was so excited by the wrapping, and inside the wrapping the beautiful box, that she almost ignored the present itself. Indeed, though she seemed pleased in a way with the present, later that day we found her behind an armchair playing with . . . the box. She was using it as a tiny dolls' house for some of her smaller toys. It worked so well, and was after all very pretty. She had laid out the wrapping paper around it, to be a kind of stage set, a backcloth, for the game she was playing. The fact that I can't now remember what was in the box itself – the real present – makes the point.

Hebrews is anxious that the people it's written to shouldn't make that mistake. They are Jewish Christians, as indeed all the very earliest Christians were; but this letter seems to be written not in the very earliest period, but perhaps some time between AD 50 and AD 70, possibly even after that. By that time, some Jewish Christians had got quite used to being part of a family that included **Gentiles**. They had accepted that God's purposes, after long years of preparation, had now been fully unveiled. The wrapping had come off the present; and the present was Jesus himself, God's own, unique son, sent to fulfil everything the **law** and the prophets had spoken of. They could now move on from the earlier stages of God's purpose and gladly live out the new one which had dawned.

But for many other Jewish Christians things weren't so easy. Lots of their family members, and friends and neighbours too, hadn't accepted that Jesus was the **Messiah**, and regarded them as dangerously misguided and disloyal to all that God had said earlier on. All sorts of pressure would be put on them to try to make them go back to where they'd been before, to abandon this new-found movement with its strange claims and to take up again a position of living under God's law, the law given through Moses. The law was such a magnificent thing; why would you want anything else? After all, it wasn't just given by God, though that would be important enough. It came

in splendid wrapping: it was given to Moses (so Jewish tradition declared) by angels.

This is why the long argument of Hebrews – an argument designed to show that you can't go back to an earlier stage of God's purposes, but must instead go forwards, must press on eagerly from within the new stage to the one that is yet to come – begins with a demonstration, from the Jewish scriptures themselves, that the Messiah was always intended by God to be superior to the angels, and hence (as we discover in the next two chapters) superior to the law that they brought. The law wasn't fixed for all time, as many Jews thought then and still think today; it was part of God's preparation, part of the brilliant and beautiful wrapping in which the ultimate present, God's gift of his own self in the person of the son, would be contained. This is where the letter is warning against the mistake of playing with the wrapping instead of with the present itself.

There are three things in particular which Hebrews wants to say about the way in which the Messiah is superior to the angels, each of which anticipates fuller statements later on in the letter. After the opening in verse 6, when the writer quotes Psalm 97.7 to show that God intends the angels to worship the son, he quotes three more passages about the Messiah, to contrast him with the angels who, according to Psalm 104.4, quoted in verse 7, are servants of God rather than living embodiments of him.

First, in verses 8 and 9, the letter quotes Psalm 45.6–7. This is a breathtaking passage, because it addresses the king (the whole psalm is about the king) as if he can be called 'God'. It speaks of the king, in this godlike way, as exercising a sovereign rule through which, as many passages said should be the case, uprightness, justice and the rule of true law are put into effect in the world. One of the great themes about God's future purposes throughout the Bible is that God longs for real justice. We who, through our newspapers and television, are all too aware that injustice and wickedness flourish all over the place could do worse than reflect on this promise. Indeed, God's aim of forgiving the sins of his people, about which this letter has so much to say, is all part of the larger aim, to create a world in which evil has at last no place. And the point of the psalm, as Hebrews quotes it here, is that all this is to happen, not through angels (they are just assistants in the process), but through the true anointed king, the Messiah.

The second passage comes from Psalm 102.25–27 and picks up on the 'for ever and ever' in the previous quotation. There is coming a time, says the psalm, when the present world, earth and **heaven** alike, will be rolled up like a scroll, and new heavens and a new earth will take their place. Hebrews returns to this theme at the end of chapter 12,

and much of the letter from here to there is to be understood within this framework. God's preparatory purposes through the law and the prophets have reached their climax in the Messiah; and the Messiah himself will be the one who will see God's plan of salvation and justice through to the ultimate 'new age', the '**age to come**', the time of renewed heavens and earth. He is the same, yesterday, today and for ever (13.8); the angels were preparing the way, but he is the one whose life, and saving rule, will last to all eternity (see particularly chapter 7).

The third, shorter passage comes from Psalm 110, one of the passages which was widely used in early Christianity to interpret the meaning of Jesus' messiahship. Hebrews, too, will come back to it several times more. It speaks of the enthronement of God's true king at God's right hand, and of the sovereign rule which he will exercise until everything that thwarts his purpose of justice and salvation will be defeated. Once again, nothing like this is ever said about angels; they, Hebrews concludes, are simply servants, with a job to do within God's purposes. Once you see who the son really is, and the role he was always intended to play in God's plan, you won't want to go back to anything or anyone less.

Not many readers today, perhaps, will be tempted to abandon Christianity in favour of some form of Judaism – though it is important for us to understand why that was such an obvious pressure in the early days. But many today, including many in the churches, seem dissatisfied with what they have, and are eager to expand their spiritual horizons (as they might see it) to include angels, saints and other interesting distractions. Let this letter serve as a warning and an encouragement. Don't start playing with the wrapping instead of the true present. Pay closer attention to who Jesus really is; to the role he played, and still plays, in God's plan; and to the life of worship and service to which he, and he alone, calls each one of us.

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