ADVENT

SEASONAL READINGS
BY N.T. WRIGHT

N.T. WRIGHT ONLINE
RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING

About The Author

N.T. WRIGHT

N.T. Wright is a prolific author for both academic and popular readers. He is the author of *Simply Jesus, Surprised by Hope, The Day the Revolution Began, Jesus and the Victory of God,* and *Paul and the Faithfulness of God.* He is also the author of the For Everyone Series of New Testament Commentaries.

He currently serves as Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. Previously Wright served as Bishop of Durham, Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey, and Dean of Lichfield Cathedral. For twenty years he served as Professor of New Testament Studies at Cambridge, McGill, and Oxford Universities.

He writes often for newspapers in England, including the Times, the Independent, and the Guardian. He has been interviewed numerous times by radio and television broadcasters on both sides of the Atlantic, including ABC, NBC, CNN, PBS, FOX, and NPR. N.T. Wright Online provides courses developed by Professor N.T. Wright of St. Andrews University, Scotland, such as Simply Jesus and Paul and His Letter to the Ephesians.

You can sign up for a free course at ntwrightonline.org/philemon.

Celebrating the Arrival of the King

As we prepare for Advent and Christmas, one obvious theme is the kingship of Jesus. We use royal language about Jesus a lot but we seldom pause to think what exactly that ought to mean both when we talk about Jesus himself and when we think about leadership and government in the world.

On both sides of the Atlantic just now we are living with the surprising results of democracy, and this is a great moment to reflect on God's vision for human government, and indeed God's vision for a healthy human society.

I find myself returning again and again to Psalm 72. Some theologians in our day have protested against royal psalms like this one, seeing them as exercises in spurious divine legitimation for oppressive regimes.

But this Psalm stoutly resists all such deconstruction, for two obvious reasons to start with and then more as we go deeper into its message.

Making a Bigger Mess

Psalm 72 holds out for us a vision of a world aflame with glory; a world in which justice is done, especially for the poor and for those who have nobody to speak for them. This is a vision of a king to whom the kings of the earth come bearing gifts because he is doing what they know they ought to be doing, namely delivering the needy when they call out, having pity on the weak and poor, rescuing the helpless from the greedy, the oppressive and the violent.

How many times in recent years, recent days, have we longed for a society like that? In my country, and I think also in yours, the political elites and the

pollsters grossly underestimated the fact that while in London and New York and elsewhere the rich were getting richer and organising the system to their advantage, in many parts of my country, including Durham where I used to work, and in many parts of your lovely country too, there were people whose cries for help seemed to be going unheeded.

The real poverty and hardship faced by many in the waste places of the former industrial heartlands have not been addressed. The job descriptions have not come true. Politicians come and go but they always have as part of their stated aim the radical improvement of the country, of the world, of the lives of ordinary people.

Most public servants start out believing in that aim and object, but even if they are not befuddled by the many compromises they have to make on the way up they will be dazzled by the glittering temptations of power and prestige; or they will suppose that the way to put the world right will be a heavy-handed solution imposed from above, whether through a new social structure which might just trickle down to where it's really needed or through bombs and missiles raining down on our perceived enemies.

My friends, we've tried all these again and again and the world is in more of a mess, not less, as a result. It is time to glimpse the biblical vision of God's kingdom which we find in this Psalm, as we read it through the lens of the gospel of Jesus in which its theme is intensified, not relativized as so many have imagined….

Why Psalm 72?

The obvious Christian reason is that this Psalm is picked up by both Matthew and Luke in announcing the birth of Jesus. Matthew's Magi bringing gifts to the baby Jesus are obviously fulfilling the prophecies of this Psalm about the gifts brought by the kings of Sheba and Seba, and indeed it may be the implicit reference to this Psalm which, in popular imagination, has turned the Magi into actual kings.

Luke's Benedictus, celebrating John the Baptist as the royal herald, echoes the final praise of the Psalm: Blessed by the Lord, the God of Israel who

alone does wondrous things! So the first followers of Jesus were encouraged to go back to this Psalm and make it their own, which they duly did in reporting the claim of the risen Jesus to possess already 'all authority in heaven and on earth'.

The foundation of all biblical visions of God's purposes for the world, and how they are to be implemented is that the Creator God wants his world to be full of his glory, which means among other things full of true justice and generous mercy.

This is not just a vision for a far-off distant time. We are not expected to sit on our hands and wait for it to happen beyond the sky by and by. Even in Old Testament times it was perfectly possible for kings to do justice and love mercy; they often failed, but the best of them didn't do too badly. And part of the point of the resurrection narratives in the gospels is that in the risen Jesus God has already launched his new creation.

> The foundation of all biblical visions of God's purposes for the world, and how they are to be implemented is that the Creator God wants his world to be full of his glory, which means among other things full of true justice and generous mercy.

Jesus himself is both the start of that new creation and the Lord who gives his own Spirit so that his people can continue the project. You see, from Genesis 1 onwards it's clear that the Creator God wants to rule his world through wise, image-bearing human beings.

There is a Trinitarian base for all biblical political theology: the Creator wants to work in the world by his image of justice and mercy being reflected through obedient, humble, wise humans. The Davidic king is seen in some texts as the true Adam, and in others (as in Psalm72) as the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promises.

The King is therefore the archetypal image-reflecting human. The grandiose language and glorious hope of the Psalm depend on this vision, that the coming king will reflect into the world God's priority and care for the poor, the oppressed, those who suffer violence and wrong.

N.T. Wright
From Sunday Sermon, 20 November 2016

The Jesus We Never Knew

In the scriptures, the Creator made the world as a unified though two-sided creation. Heaven and earth were made for one another; the creation story in Genesis 1 is modelled on the idea of constructing a temple, a building where heaven and earth come together. The wilderness tabernacle in Exodus was then a small working model of the whole creation, with Aaron the High Priest taking the role of Adam and Eve, the divine image-bearers. When Solomon constructed the first Jerusalem Temple it, too, was a microcosm, a small working model of the whole creation, with king and priests as the image-bearers. Most people never think of Israel's Temple like this, and that is one reason we don't understand Jesus.

The Jerusalem Temple

The Jerusalem Temple was always a sign of the divine intention to renew the whole creation. It stood at the heart of Israel's national life as a sign that Israel was the bearer of the divine promise for the whole world. But remember what happened in the time of Jeremiah. The symbol was turned outside in. The Temple was seen as a talisman, an automatic guarantee of security against the outside world, no matter what the people and the priests got up to, and the result was destruction and exile.

Then in Jesus' day the chief priests who ran the system were worldly and wealthy. Equally, many would-be revolutionaries regarded the Temple as the focus for their ideology of nationalist violence. And though the Temple Mount still retained the sense of divine promise and presence, as the Western Wall in Jerusalem still does for millions of Jews, there was an equally strong sense that the great promises had not yet been fulfilled.

Prophets went on promising that YHWH would return to the Temple. But he hadn't done so yet. Isaiah had said that Israel's God would return 'in plain sight', and that the whole world would know about it; but nowhere in that extended exile does anybody say it's happened.

The Unexpected Jesus

This is where the Jesus we never knew comes into sudden focus, as unexpected then as now. We are quite used to Jesus the ethical teacher, Jesus saving souls for heaven, Jesus perhaps as a social revolutionary – or, from the other side, Jesus as a Superman-figure doing impossible things to prove his divine power. We may not agree with any or all of these pictures but at least they are familiar.

Even Leonard Cohen's disturbing image of Jesus the drowning sailor is a poetic image we can understand and relate to. But Jesus as the living embodiment of Israel's returning, rescuing God, Jesus bringing to its climax not only Israel's history but world history – this is not what we are used to, and it's not what Jesus' own contemporaries were expecting.

This unexpectedness provides, incidentally, one of the clearest signs that this story was not being invented by clever writers a generation or two later. On the contrary: Jesus' own closest followers clearly took some time to get their heads around what was happening and what it all meant.

They didn't have a template all prepared into which they could just fit Jesus. Jesus burst open the existing templates and seemed to be insisting that what he was doing was the new focal point around which previous ideas had to be reorganised.

The kingdom of God, he was saying, is like this – and this – and this – with each 'this' indicating another extraordinary thing, the healing of a crippled woman, the raising of a dead girl, the shameless party with the riff-raff, the extraordinary catch of fish, and all accompanied by small, glittering stories which broke open the existing models of what the kingdom might look like and created a fresh imaginative world into which his hearers were invited to come if they dared. A world where a shamed father welcomes home his scapegrace son. A world where it's the Samaritan who shows what

neighbour-love looks like. A world in which the seeds of the final harvest will bear a great crop but only when three-quarters of them seem to have failed. A world in which the farmer will come looking for fruit and find none; in which the vineyard-owner will send his son to get the fruit and the tenants will kill him. A world in which God will become king but not in the way everyone expected. A world in which the full revelation of divine glory will not be in a blaze of light and fire coming to dwell in the temple but rather in a life and death of utter self-giving love which, for those with eyes to see, will reflect the self-giving love of creation itself….

What We Mean When We Say God

In western culture, people have routinely imagined that the word 'God' is univocal, that it always means the same. It doesn't, and never has. There are various options. If you ask someone… if they believe in God, chances are they will think of the god of modern western imagining, which is either the eighteenth-century Deist god – distant, aloof, detached but still threatening – or even the still more distant Epicurean divinities, off on their own while the world does its own thing.

In reaction to that, now as in the ancient world, many flirt with pantheism – there's a divine force in everything and we're all part of it – but that too has little in common with the Temple-focused, story-shaped world of Jesus. Many Christians will think in Platonic terms, of an upstairs world where the soul belongs with God as opposed to the messy, shabby downstairs world of physicality and politics. No wonder we never really knew Jesus, even though in grace and mercy he makes himself known despite our wrong ideas and mistaken imaginings.

But when you start with the story of a long-awaited return from exile which is also the forgiveness of sins; when you start with the unfinished narrative of YHWH and his dealings with his people; when you hold in your minds the promise that when all other help fails then Israel's God will come in person to rescue and deliver; and when you start with the symbol of the temple in which heaven and earth belong together as a sign of creation and new creation, with a human being, a king or a priest, standing there to complete the picture in offering a true sacrifice; then it makes sense, glorious sense,

world-shattering sense, heaven-and-earth sense to see Jesus of Nazareth as the climax of this story, the fulfilment of this symbol, the living embodiment of this God.

> When you start with the story of a long-awaited return from exile which is also the forgiveness of sin...world-shattering sense, heaven-and-earth sense to see Jesus of Nazareth as the climax of this story, the fulfilment of this symbol, the living embodiment of this God.

The Gospels Invitation

And the four gospels which tell his rich, powerful story are written as an invitation. Here, they are saying, is the story of the world's true God. You didn't know him, but he knew you. You didn't want him, truth be told, because he comes to wound as well as to heal, to warn as well as to welcome.

But the four gospels tell their story and invite you to read it and make it your own. To read it prayerfully, humbly, wonderingly, asking that your own life will be reoriented around this life, this divine life, this human life. Jesus reaches out his hand as to a drowning child, and we who feel ourselves sinking under the wisdom of the world will find that in his brokenness he will touch our brokenness, that in his forsakenness he will meet us in ours.

N.T. Wright
Excerpt from a lecture presented at SMU on 15 November 2016

Reflections on John's Prologue

In the beginning was the Word…. And the Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us; and we gazed upon his glory.

John positively urges us in his prologue to see the whole of the story he will tell within the long reach of the first two books of the Bible. John, after all, focuses his story again and again on the Temple, on Jesus' upstaging of the Temple, on his implicit warning to the Temple and its guardians, and on his final performance of that which the Temple itself could not effect.

From Genesis to the Temple

What has that to do with Genesis and Exodus? Well, everything: because Genesis 1 and 2 describe, to anyone with first-century eyes, the construction of the ultimate Temple, the single heaven-and-earth reality, the one Cosmos within which the twin realities of God's space and our space are held together in proper balance and mutual relation.

The seven stages of creation are the seven stages of constructing a temple, into which the builder will come to take up residence, to take his 'rest': Here is Zion, my resting-place, says Israel's God in the Psalms.

Within this Temple there is of course, as the final element of construction, the Image: the true Image through which the rest of creation sees and worships the creator, the true Image through which the sovereign and loving creator becomes present to, in and with his creation, working out his purposes. Genesis 1 declares that the God who made the world is the heaven-and-earth God, the working-through-humans-in-the-world God.

(I wish there was a word for that; it might be easier in German; or perhaps we could take the Greek and speak not just of an anthropic God, a God who was appropriately bodied forth in human life, but a dianthropic God, a God who desired to express himself perfectly by working through humans in the world.)

What Story is John Telling?

Already, with this vision of Genesis before us, we understand both the beginning and the climax of John's gospel: in the beginning, en arche, bereshith: in the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word became flesh. And on the last Friday, the ultimate sixth day of the week, the representative of the world's ruler declares 'behold the Man'.

> Genesis 1 declares that the God who made the world is the heaven-and-earth God, the working-through-humans-in-the-world God.

Like Caiaphas earlier, Pontius Pilate says far, far more than he knows, acknowledging that Jesus is the Proper Man, the true Image, the one at whom, when people gaze, they see the Father; the one through whom the Father is present, and powerfully working, to bring about his desire and design. And in the end, when the light has shone in the gathering darkness and the darkness has tried to extinguish it, the final word echoes Genesis once more: tetelestai, it is finished. The work is accomplished.

There follows the rest of the seventh day, the rest in the tomb, before the first day of the new week when Mary Magdalene comes to the garden and discovers that new creation has begun. John is writing a new Genesis, and the death of Jesus places at the heart of this new heaven-and-earth reality the sign and symbol of the Image through which the world will see and recognise its Creator and know him as the God of unstoppable love, the sign and symbol of the Image through which the Creator has established that love at the climax of world history and as the fountain-head for the rivers of living water that will now flow out to refresh and renew his whole world. That is the primary story John is telling.

A New Genesis Means a New Exodus

But if it is a new Genesis it is also a new Exodus. For years, when reading Exodus, I confess that I used to misjudge what Moses says repeatedly to Pharaoh: Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the desert. I used to think this was just an excuse: we want to go home to our promised land, but let's just tell Pharaoh that we want to worship our God and that we can't do it in his land, surrounded by his gods.

But the whole logic of the book of Exodus, and indeed of the Pentateuch as a whole, forbids that interpretation. If you read Exodus at a run you will easily arrive at Mount Sinai in chapter 20; up to that point it's a page-turner, one dramatic incident after another, but then suddenly the pace seems to slacken as we get miscellaneous rules and regulations, though not (to be honest) very many of them yet.

Don't stop there; forge ahead; because the whole narrative is indeed moving swiftly forward to the aim and object of the whole thing, which is the restoration of creation itself, the purpose for which God called Abraham and his family in the first place, the purpose through which heaven and earth will be joined together once more, only now in dramatic symbol and onward pointing sign. The giving of Torah itself is just a preparation; what matters is the Tabernacle.

The Tabernacle is the microcosmos, the little world, the heaven-and-earth place, the mysterious, untameable, moving tent – or perhaps it is the world that moves, while the tent stays still? – in which the living God will come to dwell, to tabernacle, in the midst of his people, in the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. The whole of the book of Exodus is itself moving towards this moment, in chapter 40, when the Tent is set up, constructed and decorated with the highest human artistry, which itself is part of the point, and the Divine Glory comes to dwell in it, so that even Moses couldn't enter the Tent because of that glorious presence. Exodus 40 answers to Genesis 1 and 2: creation is renewed, heaven and earth are held together, the world itself is halted from its slide back towards chaos, and the people of God, tent-makers and tent-keepers and pilgrims wherever the glory-filled Tent will lead them, are to live the dangerous and challenging life of the people in whose midst there dwells, in strange humble sovereignty, the promise and hope for

the whole of creation. (This is course is why Leviticus is where it is and what it is, with the priests as the humans who stand at the intersection of heaven and earth; but that's another story.)

All of this and much more – think of Solomon's Temple in 1 Kings 8, think of the vision in Isaiah 6 – is then poured by John into the dense and world-shaping reality of the Prologue as it reaches its climax. In the beginning was the Word; and the Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us; and we gazed upon his glory.

We have been allowed where Moses was not. We have seen the glory, the heaven-and-earth reality, the human microcosmos, the Tent where the God of the Exodus is revealed as the One God of creation and new creation. The Exodus through which creation is rescued and renewed; the new creation which comes to birth on the eighth day after the dark power, the great and terrible Pharaoh, has been defeated once and for all. This is the story that John is telling.

N.T. Wright
Excerpt from an Address to Dallas Episcopal Clergy, 16 November 2016

> "We have been allowed where Moses was not. We have seen the glory, the heaven-and-earth reality, the human microcosmos, the Tent where the God of the Exodus is revealed as the One God of creation and new creation."

Celebrating the Arrival of the King

Luke 1:57-80: Zechariah's Prophecy, The Kingdom New Testament

The time arrived for Elisabeth's child to be born, and she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had increased his mercy to her, and they came to celebrate with her.

Now on the eighth day, when they came to circumcise the child, they were calling him by his father's name, Zechariah. But his mother spoke up.

'No,' she said, 'he is to be called John.'

'None of your relatives', they objected, 'is called by that name.'

They made signs to his father, to ask what he wanted him to be called. He asked for a writing tablet, and wrote on it, 'His name is John.'

Everyone was astonished. Immediately his mouth and his tongue were unfastened, and he spoke, praising God. Fear came over all those who lived in the neighbourhood, and all these things were spoken of throughout all the hill country of Judaea. Everyone who heard about it turned the matter over in their hearts.

'What then will this child become?' they said. And the Lord's hand was with him.

John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and spoke this prophecy:

'Blessed be the Lord, Israel's God!
He's come to his people and bought them their freedom.
He's raised up a horn of salvation for us
In David's house, the house of his servant,
Just as he promised, through the mouths of the prophets,
The holy ones, speaking from ages of old:
Salvation from our enemies, rescue from hatred,
Mercy to our ancestors, keeping his holy covenant.
He swore an oath to Abraham our father,
To give us deliverance from enemy hands,
So we might worship him, holy and righteous
Before his face to the end of our days.
You, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest One,
Go ahead of the Lord, preparing his way,
Letting his people know of salvation,
Through the forgiveness of all their sins.
The heart of our God is full of mercy,
That's why his daylight has dawned from on high,
Bringing light to the dark, as we sat in death's shadow,
Guiding our feet in the path of peace.'

The child grew, and became powerful in the Spirit. He lived in the wilderness until the day when he was revealed to Israel.

Anchored in the Old Testament

Luke, like Matthew, anchors the story he is going to tell in the story of the Old Testament. But Luke, unlike Matthew, broadens this story almost immediately so that we are reminded that what God does for his people is actually of world-wide relevance. Luke Chapter One is full of echoes of First Samuel, of the original birth and call of Samuel, then Samuel's ministry of finally anointing King David. He is wanting to say that John the Baptist, whose birth is like a new Samuel, is going to anoint the new and true King, Jesus, in his baptism.

But in Chapter Two, Luke broadens that perspective because 'in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled, registered for taxation'. Suddenly we find ourselves not only on the map of Israel, but on the map of Rome, the greatest empire the world had ever known. And Luke wants us, I think, to relish the fact that Caesar in Rome gives a decree and at the far end of his empire, the 'back of beyond', as far as he was concerned, a young man and his intended bride go on a journey to Bethlehem and have a child. This is, in fact, the true King who is going to make Caesars, in the days to come, shiver in their shoes until finally they relent and acknowledge Him to be the Lord of the world.

All of that Luke is hinting in the way he sets the story up. And indeed, when we get to the genealogy of Jesus in Luke, we find that the genealogy goes back, not to Abraham, but actually to Adam. Luke is telling us the story of Jesus, as the story of the world, as the story of the whole human race, which is addressed by the God of the Old Testament, the God of Israel, who is now made known in Jesus.

The Story About the Temple

Luke also indicates, right from the beginning, that this story is about the temple, about the judgment on the present temple, and about Jesus as the one who is building the new temple. The Gospel of Luke begins in the temple with Zechariah, who is given a vision, and not believing the vision, because the angel tells him that his wife is going to have a child and he doesn't initially grasp that at all. Then, Jesus is presented in the temple, which is unique to Luke. This goes on right to the end of the Gospel of Luke. Right at the end of the Gospel of Luke, the disciples are in the temple praising God.

But the temple has been under judgment. As we find again and again in the Old Testament, the present Jerusalem temple has become the symbol of resistance to the will of God, a symbol of the fact that Israel is hard-hearted. The temple encapsulates the two stories we have seen throughout the Old Testament: the narrative of promise and of God's presence, as well as the narrative of Israel's rebellion.

In Luke 15 we find Jesus encapsulating the point of God's presence and Israel's rebellion in three parables. We find in Luke 15, 'Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to Jesus to listen to him'. Luke has many scenes where people are having parties and feasting with Jesus. And people grumble about it. 'The Pharisees and Scribes are grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with him"'.

How Jesus Announced the Kingdom

In other words, how could he possibly be announcing God's kingdom? Because if he was really an agent announcing God's kingdom, he would be respecting and favoring and spending time with the rest of us who are trying to keep the law—the rest of us who are 'righteous' and being faithful to Israel's God. Jesus tells them the three parables: The Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Lost Son, or the Parable of the Lost Sons (because the parable is as much about the older brother as it is about the younger). Each of these stories is about explaining why there is a party going on.

Here's the punch: 'Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance' (Luke 15:7).

Jesus is saying, 'When I am sharing fellowship with and welcoming and forgiving sinners, then the angels are having a party upstairs'. What he is saying is that we should be having a party downstairs as well. What he is doing, therefore, is joining together heaven and earth. He is saying that what I am doing is the actual instantiation on earth as in heaven of the celebration that is going on in God's court among the angels. The angels are having a party and so should we! Heaven and earth coming together.

Then the risen Jesus, in Luke 24, explains how the whole story of Jesus' life and death all fits together. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus are puzzled because they thought that this Jesus whom they followed was going to redeem Israel, that he was the one who was going to do at last what they have been waiting for hundreds of years. But they crucified him so he

couldn't have been the one. Jesus says, 'You have it entirely upside down and inside out…. was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter his glory?'.

The entire narrative is shaped by the creator God, shaped through Exodus, shaped through the story from Abraham to David, shaped by exile and the promises of restoration.

As we read Luke, we should see it as the culmination of that great scriptural story, but now being transformed into a new mode: the mode of mission, the mode of suffering, the mode of holiness, the mode of following Jesus to the ends of the earth.

N.T. Wright
From a lecture in the course *The Many Storied World of the Bible* (not yet released).

N.T. WRIGHT ONLINE

RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING

Our next course 'Paul: A Biography' will be available in February 2018.

Visit our website to see a full catalogue of courses.

www.ntwrightonline.org
facebook.com/ntwrightonline
twitter.com/ntwrightonline