

# Community Oracles: A Model for Applying and Preaching the Prophets

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**Abstract:** The prophets preached for community, but we rarely use their works that way. The common approach to preaching the prophets focuses on narrative biography (like Jonah or Hosea) or prayer (like Habakkuk). The usual application is individualistic (“Jeremiah prayed and so should you”). This paper will present a redemptive-historical model for applying and preaching the prophetic oracles that is communal in approach. Prophets drew on a common past (the Mosaic tradition), preached from a shared identity (the people of God), and envisioned a corresponding future (judgment and salvation). By helping people to draw these same connections to their own place in redemptive history, preachers can follow the prophets’ example in order to forge a community through preaching.

## Introduction

For many preachers, though the rest of their Bibles may be well-worn, dog-eared, and underlined, the section after the Song of Solomon and prior to Matthew remains in mint condition, gilded edges still shining. How can we bring this section—the Old Testament prophets—into the pulpit? How can we help our people become familiar with those strange men of Israel and Judah, whose words were like a fire shut in up their bones? What do they have to do with us?

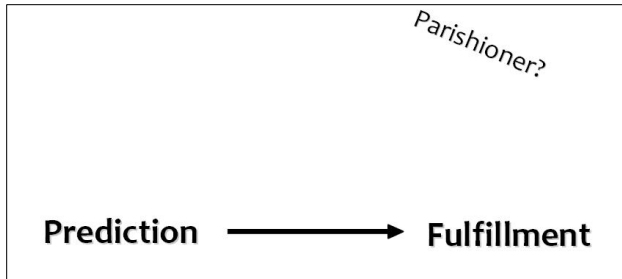


Figure 1

one often wonders in these types of sermons—where is my audience in this text?

Of course, there are two familiar paths available to anyone who wants to preach from the Old Testament prophets: First, the preacher can trace a prophecy of Scripture and its eventual fulfillment in history (Figure 1). The lesson is usually that the Bible is true, or that God keeps his word, or that he knows all things. But fanciful guesses and speculative end-times scenarios haunt this road. Besides,

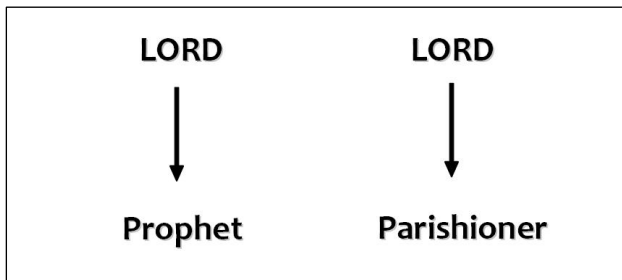


Figure 2

Alternatively (and more commonly), one can focus on the elements in the prophetic corpus that tell a story about the prophet’s life. Here the preacher is back on solid ground, in the world of narrative, and all that remains is to

draw parallels between the life of the prophet and the life of the parishioner (Figure 2).<sup>1</sup>

Although often utilized, this approach suffers from several disadvantages. In the first place, it is highly individualistic. The Holy Spirit inspired Isaiah to create a masterful account of his calling and God's glory in the temple (Isa 6). Did God do this just to provide a blueprint for how he might call Joe Smith to a pastorate in Cincinnati? Of course, Isaiah can serve as an example for our lives; but this passage probably has a grander purpose. (Such a misplaced focus also has a corporate version, where sermons draw lessons for a modern nation from ancient Israel.<sup>2</sup>) Secondly, the individual approach can be wildly inconsistent: one applies some details of the narrative (like Jonah's running from God) to modern lives, and omits others (huge storms, giant fish, Assyrian hostility, God's care for livestock, predicted disaster, and miraculous vines and worms) in a manner that seems suspect. Why would some aspects be meaningful today and not others? Finally, this approach drastically limits preaching selection, since most of the prophets' writing is *not* narrative in form. Most sections are what Westermann called "prophetic speech"—oracles from Yahweh to his people Israel, through the mouth of an inspired prophet.<sup>3</sup> In view of these disadvantages, the modern preacher should look for an alternative approach.

This paper will outline another way forward for applying and preaching the prophetic oracles of the Old Testament<sup>4</sup>—a method that draws heavily from the biblical and historical context of the passage in question, but also takes seriously our own place in redemptive history. This route from the prophet to the parishioner is less direct but more secure, and eventually can be more edifying to a modern congregation. By focusing on the redemptive historical context of a prophetic speech, preachers can apply such a passage to their own New Covenant community in richly textured ways that are both faithful to the biblical author's intent and helpful in building Christian community. The approach itself will first be described, and then examples will be provided.

## Prophetic Oracles

According to Heschel, prophecy is "exegesis of existence from a divine perspective."<sup>5</sup> God's word to a prophet is a commentary from a heavenly point of view on Israel's situation. The prophet can see his nation and his countrymen through God's eyes, and this radical vision moves him to action. He speaks Yahweh's word to his audience, setting before them God's view of their situation, which is usually radically different from their own. Israel may feel secure, but Yahweh warns of destruction. Or they may be hopeless, and hear his word of comfort and restoration. Brueggemann puts this well in his insightful work: "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."<sup>6</sup>

But this revelation from God does not take place in a vacuum! These are not just any people to whom the prophet speaks. They are Israel—Yahweh's own nation by covenant. They are bound to him and to one another in an intricate web of relationships, to which the prophets refer again and again (see Figure 3).<sup>7</sup> To God's people, a prophet offered "a word that connected them to their covenant roots and their future hope."<sup>8</sup>

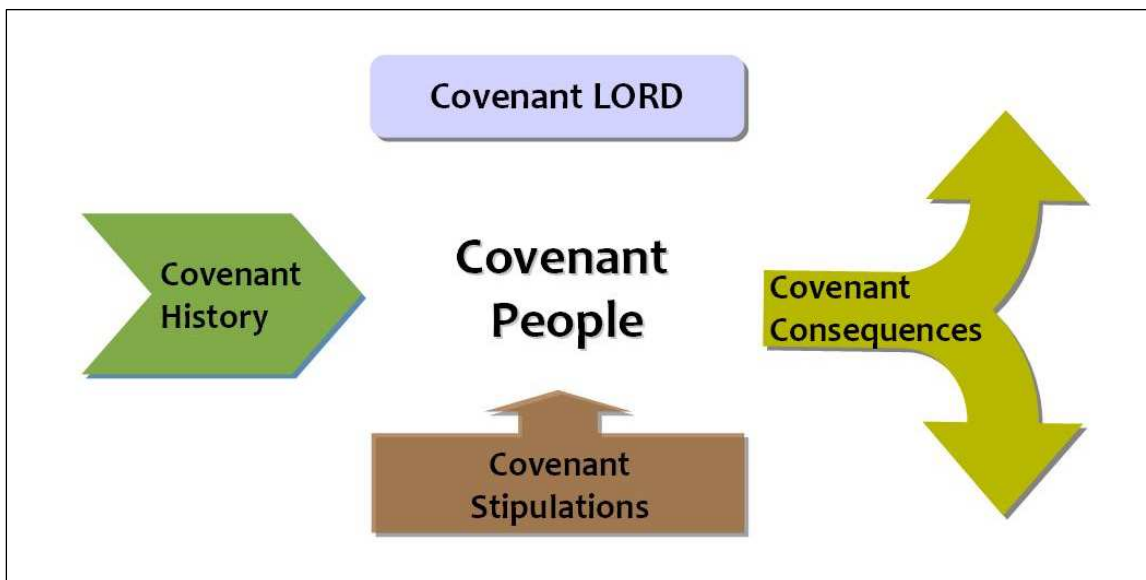


Figure 3

Prophets spoke about Israel's covenant LORD, whose character forms a basis for their relationship (Isa 44:6-8). They talked about their history with him and his faithfulness in the past (Ezek 16:1-14). They reminded Israel of the stipulations of their covenant with God (Hos 10:12), and how they have or have not kept them. And they repeated the dual covenant consequences of blessings for obedience and curses for rebellion (Isa 1:18-20). Often a single passage will run through several of these phases in turn. In Micah 6, for example, under the guise of a lawsuit against his people, God reminded Judah of how he brought them into the Promised Land (vv. 3-5), discussed the type of response he required (vv. 6-8), observed their faithlessness (vv. 9-12), and warned of curses to come (vv. 13-16).

Figure 3 can apply to any of the several covenant arrangements that were in effect during Israel's history. The Abrahamic, the Mosaic, and the Davidic covenants were the primary arrangements depicted in the Old Testament. Prophets drew on these as appropriate to each situation they faced, since each covenant carried its own stipulations and consequences. Most commonly, a prophet would refer to the shared heritage of the Mosaic Covenant with Israel. He would remind them of God's mighty acts of deliverance in Egypt and at the Red Sea, or of his faithfulness in the conquest of the Promised Land (Amos 2:10). Or he could recall for them some of the Ten Commandments that they had broken (Jer 7:9), and warn them of the covenant curses like foreign conquest (Hab 1:5-11, cf. Deut 28:49), or promise some of the covenant blessings like peace and agricultural prosperity (Ezek 34:25-31, cf. Lev 26:3-5).

These mutually understood covenants formed the major points of contact between the prophets and their audience—they were the chief source from which the prophets drew for credibility in communication. Their only claim to reliability was that Yahweh had sent them, based on his promises to their nation. For instance, when God spoke to Ezekiel (14:12-23) about famine, wild beasts, sword and pestilence that would destroy Jerusalem, he only brought to the surface the age-old warnings from Deut 28. This prophecy was not novel, nor fanciful, nor should it have been a surprise. Ezekiel simply enforced the terms of the covenant already in place.

In fact the vast majority of prophetic oracles fit into this type of a pattern, highlighting one or more of these covenant elements. This was their standard pattern. They constantly relied on this heritage to make their points and convey their meaning. The covenant was their normal frame of reference.<sup>9</sup>

### *Community Oracles*

Critical for contemporary application is the fact that the oracle was not about the individual at all, whether the individual Israelite or the individual prophet. Individuals were indeed called to respond in repentance and faith; yet the scope of the warnings and their consequences were national. *These were community oracles*, directed to a nation, and based on a specific religious heritage.

Two lines of thought support this contention. First, unlike most other parts of Scripture, prophetic oracles came in the form of a *direct corporate address*. They are not narratives or individual prayers or wise aphorisms, any of which can easily be read individually. The prophets (like most of the NT epistles) spoke directly to a group of people. Therefore interpreting them rightly requires a corporate mindset.

In addition, note that each aspect of Figure 3 relates not to individuals but to Israel as a community. *The covenant LORD is a communal LORD*. God did not make a direct covenant with each Israelite; he instead made it with Abraham, Moses, and David. Individual Israelites at the time of the prophets only participated in these realities as part of the community of descendants of these men. God addressed them as “Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend” (Isa 41:8); he called himself not “the God of each one of you” but (49 times in Jeremiah alone) “the God of Israel.”

*The covenant history was a communal history*. In the prophets, God did not so much talk of his faithfulness to each Israelite in his individual life as he did of his faithfulness to Moses, to the wilderness wanderers, to the conquering armies, and to King David. It was national and not personal history that mattered. He expected, for example, priests living in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to remember and value his covenant with Levi a millennium earlier (Mal 2:4-9). God’s gracious deeds were not so much about individual lives as about the community of faith, of which individuals were members.

*The covenant demands were communal demands*. As so many Old Testament scholars have noted,<sup>10</sup> God’s requirements in the prophetic texts focused on communal relationships. Yes, God denounced idolatry (Mic 1:7). But he spoke a great deal about oppression, injustice, unrighteous wealth, deceit, selfish leadership, murder, and adultery—and said that these violations even negated an individual’s worship (Isa 1:12-17). A communal focus was built into the content of these oracles. Obedience to God was bound up with love for neighbor.

*The covenant consequences were communal consequences*. God through his prophets promised good if his people repented and judgment if they rebelled (see, e.g., Isa 1:19-20). As it turned out, they did not repent, and were judged at the fall of Samaria (722 B.C.) and Jerusalem (586 B.C.). But surely not *all* of them were wicked? Or are we to suppose that every wicked person died a violent death during the Assyrian or Babylonian conquests, while every obedient man or

woman was spared and sent into exile? No, but God views his people as a body, and their (corporate) sins come home to roost in their (corporate) lives. As unfair as this may sound to our ears, it should highlight for us just how foundational this corporate identity was in their relationship with God. In a passage almost beyond belief, God told Israel that he would ultimately give to each individual what he deserved, and each would die for his own sin. Israel's incredulous response was that "the way of the LORD is not just" (Ezek 18:25). They thought it only right for sons to suffer for the father's sins. These are the same people who loved to say that "the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (18:2).

So every aspect of Figure 3 was corporate; *the prophetic oracles were community oracles*. They were addressed to a nation, and impacted individuals only as they were members of that larger group.

When one sees the prophets from this perspective, the bridge between then and now becomes clearer.

### **Beginning to Apply the Prophets**

How can preachers, then, bridge the gap between the ancient nation and the modern church? Two critical insights lead the way. The first is from Sidney Greidanus, who notes that in applying biblical passages to our audience, we should ordinarily resist the comparison between the biblical *character* and the modern *audience*, drawing life lessons from the experiences of biblical characters as the main interpretive thrust of a passage.<sup>11</sup> Of course, sometimes this may be what the biblical author intended—to give us a model for moral or immoral behavior and its consequences. The New Testament itself makes such comparisons using Elijah (Jas 5:16-18), Cain (1 John 3:12), and a string of OT heroes of faith (Heb 11).

However, "moral example" stories usually have indicators in the narrative to that effect: commendations of someone's character, rewards or punishments from God, or direct statements about the "point" of the story.<sup>12</sup> In the prophets (aside from Jonah, whose account does teach a lesson about compassion) we do not usually find such indicators. On the contrary: narrative sections are rare, and even when they appear biographical details are limited or absent. Using such passages as templates for individual lives does not normally have sufficient justification in the passage. Take Jeremiah, for example. We have more detail about him as a person than most other prophets. We are also allowed to see his sufferings and his emotional turmoil in the midst of an unsuccessful ministry. But two factors warn us against making his life a pattern for ours: first, his laments and complaints do *not* form the majority of the book! They are at best a minor part, with prayers and stories scattered throughout, indicating that the lesson of the book lies elsewhere. Also, Jeremiah's life ends in tragedy and failure, with no vindication by God, no fruit from his preaching, and no earthly reward for service. The point of the whole work (including the oracles as well as the biography) seems to be about the tragedy of the fall of Israel because of their hard hearts—that they "did not know how to blush" (6:15), they had forgotten God "days without number" (2:32), and their leaders spoke "peace, peace, when there [was] no peace" (6:15). The tragedy is about Israel, and Jeremiah is one man caught up in the great fall of God's people.

Often in the prophets individual detail serves such a larger purpose. Therefore using those details as a template for our lives may not be justified. On the other hand, a far more fruitful comparison can be made between the biblical *audience* and the contemporary *audience*. In other words, the wise interpreter will not ask, “How are my people like Hosea”, but will instead ask, “How are my people like the people to whom Hosea preached?”

The fact of the matter is that Hosea, as a prophet of God, was unique. The preacher may find confusing the separation between what was true *only* about Hosea (e.g., his calling, his character, his ministry, and his marriage) from what can carry over to the modern hearers. Often these choices tend to be arbitrary, based on what *we as preachers* want to say. So we might use Hosea to encourage marital fidelity, but not to justify marriage to prostitutes.

On the other hand, Hosea wrote to people who were, for lack of a more flattering term, common. More to the point, our audience and Hosea’s are alike in that *they are audiences* who both hear the word of the LORD and are called to respond. Neither group is necessarily gifted, prophetic, bold, winsome, or persecuted. To completely butcher Paul’s original meaning: “Not all are prophets, are they?” (1 Cor 12:29). Comparisons between two audiences will proceed on much safer grounds than comparisons between prophets and audiences simply because the two groups have so much more in common as God’s (generic) people. As we saw above and will see again below, what makes these two groups similar is their covenant relationship with God. *Usually (and especially in the prophets), preachers should compare audience to audience in application.*

The second insight also has to do with the biblical audience. Scholars are realizing that the process of applying the prophets to a different audience has already been started for us. Recent “canonical” approaches pay serious attention to the way in which the Scriptures were arranged for the benefit of later readers.<sup>13</sup>

Amos, for example, did not give all of his recorded prophecies at one moment in time, nor did he necessarily give them in that order. Either Amos himself or a group of his disciples most likely wrote down many of his oracles, and arranged them in the form in which they appear in Scripture. This later form was probably intended for a later audience. This is why, for example, many prophetic books (like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Zechariah, and Malachi) end on a note of redemption and promise. Those endings are not coincidental, but are part of a contextualization process meant to encourage later readers who had perhaps seen some of Yahweh’s judgment, and were awaiting his favor and forgiveness. An audience in the Babylonian exile or among the weak remnant in Jerusalem would read these books, gain an understanding of why judgment came upon Israel, and harbor a future hope in God’s promises.

The very arrangement of these books (internally as well as in their order in the canon) tells us that though a prophet’s message was delivered in one time period to one people, his word *remained relevant for a different audience that lived much later.*

That first move in application should encourage the preacher because it proves that the message of the prophets was relevant to a broader audience than the original one. In fact, the shared covenant history and covenant relationship with God supply a continuing relevance for later (ancient) readers. Since they are in relationship with the same God on the same terms, God’s

words to a pre-exilic community remain helpful for those living during or even after the exile. This type of reading starts us on the road to applying the prophets to a contemporary audience.

At the same time, the canonical approach should give a preacher pause, because the message may serve a different purpose for a later audience than for its original hearers.<sup>14</sup> For example, a warning about the destruction of Jerusalem will be heard differently by someone living before 586 B.C. than by someone living after that critical date. For the former, the oracle is an ominous threat. But for the latter it may serve as a reminder of God’s longsuffering, his justice, and his mercy in sustaining a remnant of survivors. *This means that the relevance of the prophet’s words must be determined by the historical situation of the current audience.* This will be critical as one applies their words to the present day church.

### Applying the Prophets to the Church

How do the ancient prophecies apply to the modern Christian? There is no similarity of individual language, culture, or life situation. The similarity, in fact, is hardly *individual* at all. It is corporate: the nation of Israel and the church of Christ share similarities in their covenant relationship with God (see below). *As such, the prophets’ words readily apply to the church at large, and to the individual Christian as a member of the church.*

#### *Our New Covenant Context*

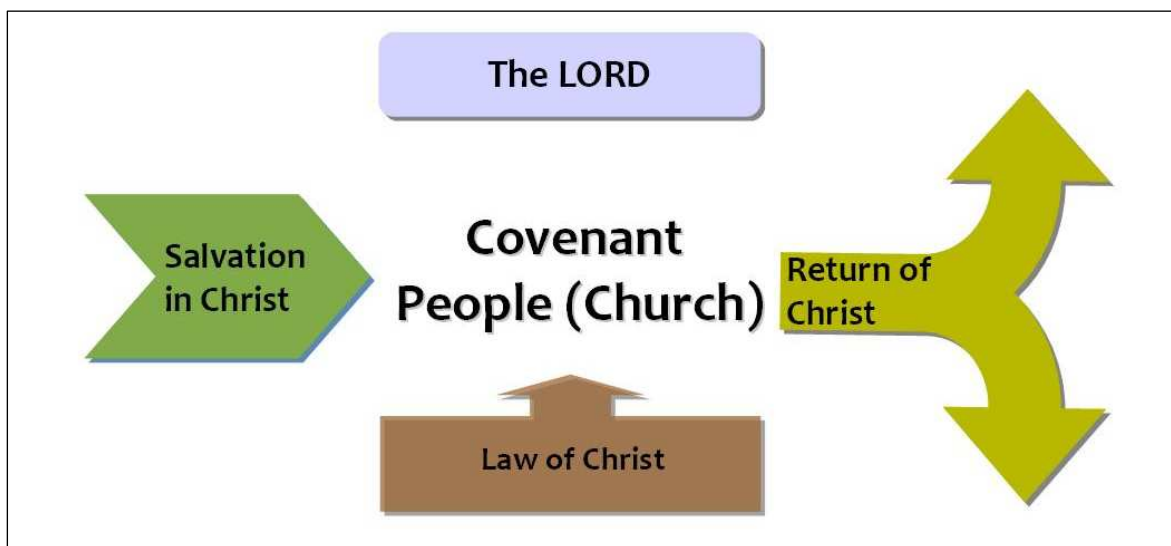


Figure 4

As Figure 4 indicates, New Testament believers also live in covenant with God—what Jeremiah (31:31) called a “new covenant” and Isaiah (54:10) and Ezekiel (37:26) a “covenant of peace”. This similarity of situation—living in covenant with the same Lord as Israel did—provides the surest bridge for applying the prophets today. They both (Israel and the church) live under the same covenant LORD, who does not change in his character or affections. They both live in the light of his past deeds for their good (whether the promises to Abraham, the Exodus, the Davidic kings, or the climactic salvation found in the death and resurrection of Christ). They both live

under his demands for love and obedience as his people. And they both live in hope that God's promises of ultimate salvation and judgment will be fulfilled. Our hope is the return of Christ, the Second Advent, when he will defeat his enemies and pour out his grace on his church. The church's covenant situation is remarkably similar to Israel's.

And just like Israel, this covenant situation is a *community arrangement*. God loves us as individuals, and we are saved by (individual) faith through grace. But we are Christians because we are all *in Christ*—members of his one body, and members of one another. Just as each element in Figure 3 was corporate, so in Figure 4. God is our Father because we are members of the family of faith. The salvation he accomplished happened long before we were born, yet applies to the whole church and therefore to us as members. The Law of Christ is for all of us, as are his promises for eternal life. The blood of Christ, the words of Christ, the presence of Christ, applies to each of us only as we are in Christ, and part of this community. This means that the words of the prophets to the OT *community* can best be applied to the NT *community*.

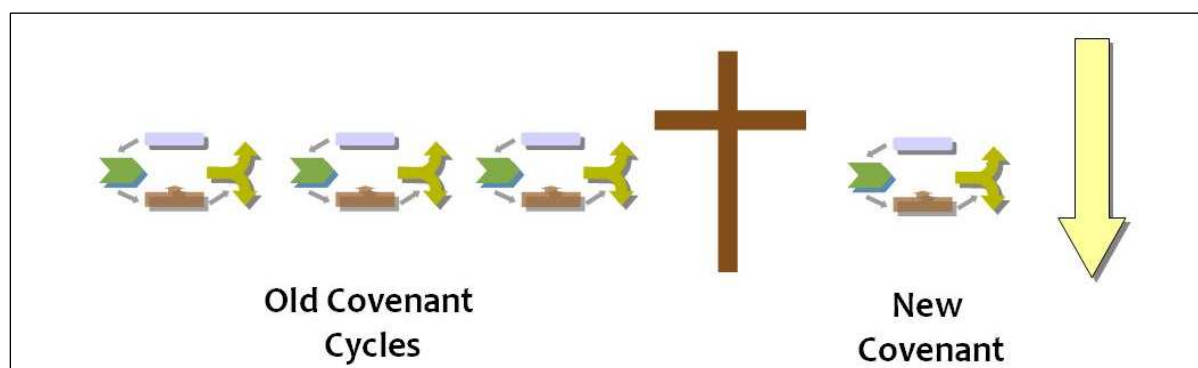
Of course, appropriate application will also take into account the situational differences between Israel and the church. For though our God is the same, the Old and New Covenants differ in some respects. Greidanus notes three kinds of “distance” that preachers should consider in applying ancient Scripture to modern people: culture, levels of revelation, and kingdom history.<sup>15</sup> Cultural differences are omnipresent in Scripture, and need not detain us here. As for levels of revelation, the preacher should take into account that prophets did not always see the full picture of God's work. We have the benefit of God's definitive self-revelation in Christ, and as such, that gives us insight into the events to which the prophets were looking forward. This may change how we preach a prophetic text. For example, in Amos 9:11 if the prophet speaks of God restoring David's fallen “tent” (i.e., his dynasty), that foreign nations like Edom would come and be called by God's name. In Acts 15 James cites this prophecy as being fulfilled by the exaltation of Christ, the Davidic King, and by the church's mission to the Gentiles.

Most important for us are the kingdom history differences. The church is in a different place in the history of redemption, and wise preachers will think hard on the distance between the OT audience and their own. Their Exodus was physical while ours was spiritual. Their Law was of Moses, and ours is of Christ. Their promises of judgment and restoration may have already come to pass, while ours are still future.

Much of what the preacher makes of these differences will depend upon the theological system to which he or she subscribes. Some will posit far more discontinuity between the covenants, either by drawing a sharp distinction between Israel and the church, or by labeling the old covenant “conditional” (a ministry that produced death) and the new “unconditional” (producing life by the Spirit). Gowan, for example, argues that the prophets were not even demanding repentance, but were only announcing judgment.<sup>16</sup> From the beginning of their ministry, repentance was no longer an option. If true, this would obviously constitute a major discontinuity with the church's situation. Others may see far more continuity between the two eras in redemptive history. As the examples below will demonstrate, how one understands the redemptive situation in Israel and in the Church will guide the application and preaching from a prophetic oracle.

*Relating Their Context to Ours*

The prophets present a word from Yahweh to his covenant people, which a preacher hopes to re-contextualize to God's covenant people today. Applying the prophets to the church requires having an eye for the similarities in situation, but also taking into account the redemptive "distance" between their situation and ours (see Figure 5). The Scriptures record a string of covenant arrangements between God and his people, with the parallels discussed above. But each covenant has its own place in redemptive history; ours comes between the cross of Christ and the return of Christ, and as such has unique features that must be reckoned with when seeking to apply Old Covenant principles in a New Covenant situation.



**Figure 5**

Several examples follow in which these factors have been taken into account in applying the word of the Israelite prophet to the corporate church. Instead of focusing on a few well-known prophetic texts, a wide range of examples has been selected. This model for application takes each part of the covenant arrangement (God, history, demands and promises) and asks how it relates to the respective aspects of the New Covenant. The application is geared toward the corporate church rather than individuals.

*Their LORD is our Lord.* The easiest connections to make are when dealing with the oracles that discuss the character of God (which never changes). Here is a case of strict continuity between Israel and the church. For example, Isa 40:12-31 speaks of God's tremendous wisdom and power, displayed in creation and in his sovereign rule over the nations. He is not to be compared with idols or with any power of men. That idea will preach in any church today! However, a sermon will stay true to the purpose of the passage as well as the central idea. Isaiah was addressing weary believers who were looking forward to restoration after judgment. The thrust of the passage is that since God knows all and can do all, he is not ignorant of their situation (v. 27) and can be trusted to deliver them (v. 29). Believers now serve the same God, and also long for a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28), a new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3:13). Since they are God's people, they too can trust in God's knowledge and power to ultimately deliver them.

*Their history may be our history.* Sometimes the prophets recall God's promises and salvific acts on behalf of his people, and these directly apply to the church. In Jer 33:20ff, God recalls his covenant with Noah and the whole earth (Gen 8:22), establishing a firm pattern of day and night, and reasons from that faithfulness to his faithfulness to have a king and a priest stand before him. That history is our history, since the world also dwells under the same covenant order of day and night. That means that Christians today can also take comfort in God's faithful

ordering of nature, seeing it as a proof of his constancy. They can trust his promise to provide for us a great King and High Priest in Jesus Christ. God in Christ keeps his promises!

Or consider Mic 7:18-20, where the prophet recalls God's promises to show steadfast love to Abraham and Jacob. These promises provide the basis of assurance that their sins will be forgiven. The New Testament is clear that the promises to Abraham are given to those who are in Christ (Gal 3:29). Communally, we are part of the same olive tree (Rom 11:17ff). Their history (that of the patriarchs) is therefore our history and we can (along with Micah) count firmly on God's forgiveness and love, even when confronted by the enormity of our sins.

On the other hand, sometimes the redemptive "distance" between the prophet and the church calls for a more indirect approach. Often, for example, the prophets remember God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and through the Red Sea, and to Sinai and the Promised Land. In Hosea 11:1-4, for example, God recalls his deeds of kindness to Israel, and their response of unfaithfulness. Many preachers and theologians would not see the Exodus as "our" history, since that event occurred in the Mosaic period and under the Sinai covenant. However, even in the case of discontinuity, the prophets' words remain relevant. For the New Testament repeatedly applies Exodus imagery and themes to Christ's life and to our own redemption in Christ from sin and death (see, e.g., Matt 2:15, Mark 1:2-3, Rev 15:2-4). Since Christ has indeed redeemed us with mighty acts of judgment and salvation, we have an Exodus of our own to recall and for which we give thanks.

This example from Hosea continues with an announcement of judgment on Israel for her thankless idolatry. Depending on their theological orientation, some preachers would choose to highlight the *discontinuity* between Israel and the Church. We too have been unfaithful to Christ, but where sin increased, grace increased all the more (Rom 5:20). So the OT judgment has been transformed into NT forgiveness, and the sermon would be a comfort to all of us who fall short of God's standards. Others would find *continuity* more appropriate, and see here a caution for any covenant people of God who take lightly his grace and mercy, especially those who have the most complete revelation in Christ (Heb 10:26-31). This type of sermon would carry over Hosea's harsh tones from Israel to the church, and the sermon would be one of ominous warning.<sup>17</sup>

*Their demands may be our demands.* Like oracles about God's character, some covenant demands for righteous behavior translate easily. Micah's call (6:8) to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God ring true in any age. Hosea (4:1-14) rails against those guilty of murder, lying, stealing, cursing, and adultery. Jeremiah (22:13-30) condemns King Jehoiachin for injustice and hoarding wealth. Zephaniah (2:1-3) encourages people to seek the LORD, seek righteousness, and seek humility—"perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD." Any and all of these passages find clear parallels in the lives of our parishioners who are still under the injunction to "be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:44, 1 Pet 1:14-16).

On the other hand, Malachi demands tithing, Haggai exhorts his people to build a temple, and Hosea rebukes people for their political alliances with foreign nations. Again, depending on theological perspective, the distance may be too great for a straightforward application. As Haddon Robinson advises,<sup>18</sup> one should move up the ladder of abstraction, deriving increasingly general principles from specific demands, guided by Scriptural principles. So Malachi's tithing

may translate to sacrificial and joyful giving (2 Cor 8). Haggai may encourage us to build up the temple of the church (which becomes people and not a building, 1 Pet 2:4-5) or to put God's priorities ahead of our personal comfort (Luke 9:23-24). And Hosea may challenge us to trust in God's power as opposed to man's, and to be careful with whom we associate in that respect (2 Cor 6:14-18). So the prophetic demands on people may be directly applicable to our situation, or a more general principle can supply the parallel.

*Their promises may be our history.* At times, what was future for the original audience is now past for us. The promises and warnings that God gave have already come to pass. So when modern readers see God threatening to destroy Jerusalem in Amos 3:11-15, that word is not directly a threat for us, since ancient Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C. Instead, we can think of the oracle as it must have been preserved for the exiles that lived through the destruction of Jerusalem. Amos 3 explains why God's people have suffered so, highlights the seriousness of God's wrath and guarantees the coming of the judgment that he still has in store at the return of Christ.

When Isaiah spoke of a future restoration from exile (43:1-7), which is past from our perspective, we can thank God for keeping his word and caring for the faithful remnant, and we can reflect on how God continues to protect his people in the midst of suffering and trials.

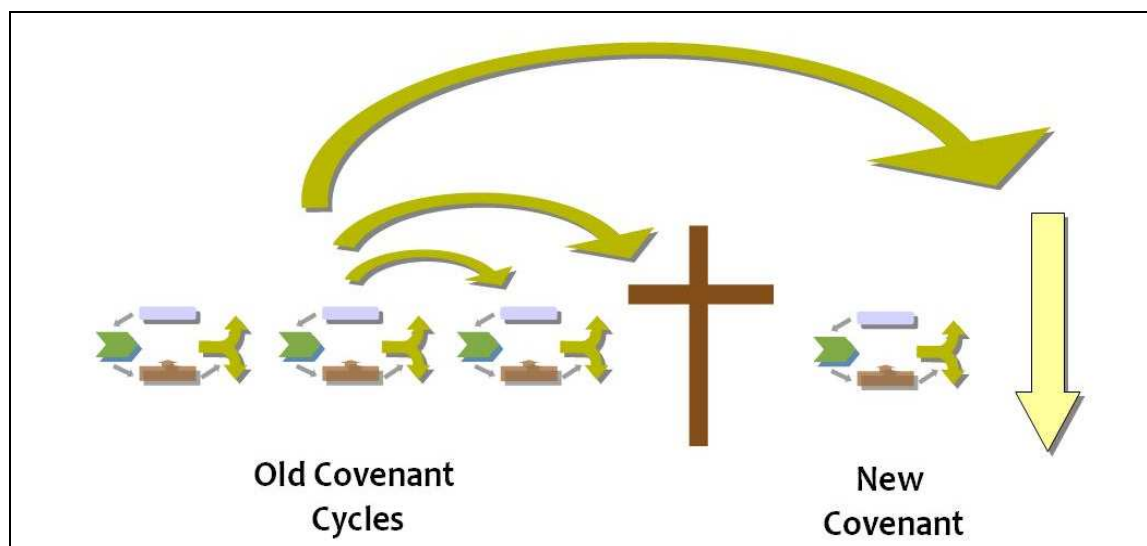
Messianic oracles also fall in this category, since the prophets predicted a Christ who has already come. Yet to be true to the original intent, the focus of the prophecy was not *just* accurate prediction, but the person and work of the coming deliverer. So yes, we should marvel that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, as Micah 5 foretold. But more important than accurate forecasting is that the one in that passage will stand as a Shepherd over God's people, and they will dwell securely under his care. That has meaning for the New Covenant people as well—we dwell under the security of the rod and staff of our Shepherd Jesus Christ.

One should also be aware that some oracles seem to be partially fulfilled, as today we live in the “already but not yet” tension of the new age. We are therefore be able to rejoice in the fulfilled promise of the mountain of the LORD (Isa 2), to which all nations now stream for knowledge of God—even though the exaltation of God's people is not yet realized physically. Or one can preach from Joel 2:28-32, where God says he will pour out his Spirit freely on his people. This happened at Pentecost, and we can be grateful for God's past action and presence by his Spirit. However, the latter part of this prophecy, that “the sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes,” has not yet come to pass—we still await the final judgment.

*Their promises may be our promises.* Finally, what was future to them may still be future to us. Again, our understanding of what these prophecies indicate will depend on our theological leanings. But we can preach from Zechariah 14 about the coming time when God will visit his people, splitting the Mount of Olives in two, saving them from their enemies, and making the entire land “holy to the LORD.” Or we can talk about the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds in Daniel 7, when he receives the kingdom from the Ancient of Days. Or we can hope for the day when God's glory and presence return to his people in the rebuilt temple in Ezek 40-48.

It is important to note that one oracle may contain several of these phases, such as Zephaniah 3:1-13. Preaching this passage will require not only a historical awareness of the prophet's life and times, but also a skillful application of the various themes, like God's unchanging character (v. 5), his past acts of judging other nations (v. 6), his demand for obedience (v. 7a), the people's rebellion (vv. 1-4, 7b), God's threatened judgment (v. 8), and his future restoration of all nations, so that they all call upon his name (vv. 9-13). As Zephaniah walks through these several parts of God's covenant relationship, so should the sermon. The preacher can highlight God's righteousness, his power, his expectations, the people's response to those demands, and the consequences for sin. He can also assure his people that God's final plan—to have a humble, obedient people from all nations—is happening and will surely come to pass.

In addition, some passages will have a multifaceted application, where different parts require different treatment. Consider, for example, the book of Joel. The prophet depicts a locust invasion (past for both Israel and us), an actual invasion of an army (future for Israel and past for us), the pouring out of his Spirit after those days (future for Israel and past for us), and the valley of judgment on the day of the LORD (future for Israel and for us). Some of these words point backwards, some to their present, some to their near future, some to the New Covenant mission, and some to the final rule of God on earth (see Figure 6). We should be aware of how each of these elements applies to our own situation. Perhaps a series might be appropriate here, focusing on each element in turn and applying as appropriate.



**Figure 6**

Once again, the basic approach is to rely on the similarities between Israel's relationship to God and our own as a bridge between the ancient and the modern. Transferring from one to the other will then be a matter of reckoning the "distance" between their covenant and ours, and making distinctions as appropriate.

The point of all of these examples is to show how the oracles of the prophets remain relevant for our day.<sup>19</sup> Just like ancient Israel, the church of Christ lives in a covenant relationship with a glorious God, who requires loving obedience and gives sure promises. Instead of drawing

tenuous parallels between prophets and individuals in our church, or between Israel and our nation, this approach relies on the much broader base of a shared communal identity as the people of God.

### **Three Benefits of this Approach**

The first benefit is more *material* to preach from. The vast majority of the OT prophetic passages are oracles, and the vast majority of those oracles fit within this covenant framework. The prophets are constantly reminding God's people of his nature, his deeds, their obligations in light of those deeds, and God's imminent response to their obedience or lack thereof. Bringing the vivid, fiery, emotive words of the prophets into a pulpit can add a depth and texture to a church's faith, and emphasize different aspects of our lives as believers that will enrich the church.

Secondly, this approach brings *consistency* in application. Many of us have preached a sermon about Jeremiah's suffering or Jonah's disobedience or Hosea's failed marriage and afterwards wondered if we got the whole picture. These men may serve as examples to individuals, but is that the totality of what God was saying in that passage? Were we missing something bigger about God, his plans and his purposes in the world? Fitting the prophetic oracles into the broad storyline of the Bible anchors them to this bigger picture. Not that this approach is always easy or transparent, but it reasons from the solid facts of redemption and God's covenant, rather than the sometimes speculative ideas of perceived parallels.

Finally, this model helps to build a community's *identity*. It was argued above that the prophets addressed their people as a community, and that their words apply to the church as a community. Too often our parishioners look into the Bible to find themselves, and to hear God's unique word to them. Of course, God's promises and warnings and declarations do affect our day to day lives, our most minute decisions, and the inner thoughts of our hearts. But (especially in the prophets), they address these realities from the perspective of being a member of a community that is in relationship with God, and that therefore is bound together inseparably. Sermons from the prophets that emulate their corporate approach will help to counterbalance a hyper-individualism, because they will speak to people through the grid of the Church's covenant relationship with God. As parishioners learn that this wonderful Lord and his gracious promises come to them because they are part of the Church, their membership in it will become more central to their self-understanding.

Additionally, preaching in this way from the prophets sets a person's relationship with God in the context of what God is doing in history. It uses the "prophetic imagination" to let people see their worlds and their lives from God's perspective, under the umbrella of his grand design. This method helps a church to understand where they are in God's larger narrative, what they have in common with Abraham and Moses, and also how they differ. This approach helps them to see themselves not as isolated individuals for whom God has a unique plan, but as members of the body of Christ, called to common purpose and sharing a common identity. God does love me, he does forgive me, he does bless me and guide me—but this happens as a part of his larger plan to reconcile the whole world to himself through his Son (Col 1:20). By drawing parishioners' eyes upward to the bigger realities of God's kingdom, we can help to train their gaze on the *church* (local and global) as the focus of God's work, of which they are but one part.

### Three Drawbacks to this Approach

This approach takes seriously the *distance* between a prophet's situation and our own. But precisely because such a sermon addresses those issues of distance, it can degenerate into a boring lecture on redemptive history. Therefore, a preacher will have to work harder to retain listeners' attention while he or she "connects the dots" between then and now; and though it may take longer to arrive at present day concerns, the sermon is not complete until it addresses contemporary life with a relevant word. Keep in mind that such a sermon may not be appropriate for a less mature audience who has no idea who Moses was in the first place. The prophets assume knowledge of the law and of Israel's history, and if our people do not have it, we may have to educate them before we can preach from the prophets.

Another disadvantage is that most of these oracles are *directed to covenant members*, i.e., believers. Sermons from the prophets are not always designed for the ears of non-Christians. They can sound bizarre, harsh, and even nonsensical to unbelievers. Yet having said that, one would be hard put to find many places in the Bible that *are* explicitly addressed to them. Preachers must constantly find ways to make the content in the Bible, written to Israelites and Christians, applicable to outsiders. This is a challenge for almost any section of Scripture.

Lastly, the major challenge of the prophets is their *monotony*. Even a casual reader will find the same themes over and over again: God's goodness, God's deliverance, God's law, the people's rebellion, God's judgment, God's salvation. Short oracles are stacked together by the dozen, prophecy after prophecy, repeating the same thing, and usually not forming a coherent larger framework. Sometimes the only framework is thematic, placing very similar prophecies side by side resulting in even less variety! This makes for a challenge, for example, to preach through any of the Major Prophets in a series.

In response, the prophets themselves had the same problem. They had only a few things to say, often unpleasant, and a calloused people to whom they must say them. Their solution was not to alter their message but to change their *style*. The prophets are richly varied in rhetorical devices, literary form, tone, and word usage.<sup>20</sup> The preacher who wants to convey the (often unpleasant) message of the prophets will also have to do some hard work to gain and hold people's attention. Greidanus advises:

Preachers should try to convey to their contemporary audiences the mood and feelings originally evoked by these forms. In the liturgy as well as in the sermon it may be possible to capture the sadness of a funeral dirge or lament or the matter-of-fact atmosphere of a lawsuit or the joy of an oracle of salvation or hymn of joy (eg, Isa 44:23). When the prophecy is in poetry, the sermon can emulate the prophecy's use of concrete imagery. When the prophecy spins out a metaphor, the sermon can follow suit and allow the audience to participate in this new and often surprising vision. Above all, a sermon on prophecy demands a form which, like the prophetic oracle, addresses the audience directly with the word of the Lord, a form which leaves no doubt as to who has broken God's covenant stipulations and what its awful results will be, but also a form which is able to convey the loving-kindness of God and his ultimate redemption.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, remember that these prophetic oracles were not given in one sitting or one setting, but are the accumulated works of a prophet over a lifetime. Most oracles can stand alone, and

are suitable for single sermons. While some of the Minor Prophets can be preached straight through, a sermon series composed of passages that demonstrate a variety of themes and tones can be a viable alternative.

## Conclusion

The central points advanced above are as follows:

- The usual handling of prophetic texts can be too individually focused, and draws disproportionately from the narrative sections of the prophetic texts.
- The prophets themselves usually preached to groups rather than individuals, and drew on the shared covenantal context of Israel's relationship with God.
- The model advocated above centers on the parallels between Israel's covenant relationship with God and the church's, applying the prophets' words to corresponding aspects of the New Covenant relationship.
- Depending on historical context and one's theological understanding, the application may be one of continuity (emulating a prophet's intent) or discontinuity (highlighting the contrast between the OT and NT situations).
- Just as the prophetic oracles addressed to the OT *community* of Israel, they also apply to the NT *community* of the church, and speak to individuals as they are members of that community.

The prophets were not isolated individuals, and neither are we. We are all members of a community that is bound together by thick theological cords. Those cords not only connect us to the present, but by memory they reach back into the past, where God has proven himself in mighty deeds of salvation and judgment. By hope they also stretch into the future, where God will usher in his glorious kingdom in a climactic manner, making all things new. These cords provide the bridge from their time to ours.

The prophets made use of those ties by preaching to a community, for the sake of community. So can we. By paying attention to the redemptive context that surrounded them and also envelopes us, parallels and applications become less fanciful and more grounded in the reality of God's larger redemptive work. As we pay attention to these realities, the word of the prophet addresses not just "me" but "us"—the people of God. Instead of trying to fit God and his work into our own personal story, we find ourselves and those around us swept up into his grander tale.

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<sup>1</sup> For just a few examples of this type of sermon from the prophets, see the following: Walter Brueggemann, "The Secret of Survival: Jeremiah 20:7-13, Matthew 6:1-8", *Journal for Preachers* 26 (2003): 42-47; Beau Hughes, *Into the Storm*, The Village Church [iTunes podcast]: 6/22/08; John Ortberg, *Resisting God*, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church [iTunes podcast]: 11/08/08; Rich Richardson, *Consider God: Habakkuk Part 1*, Sovereign Grace Church [iTunes Podcast]: 6/17/07; V.L. Stanfield, "Preaching Values in Jeremiah", *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 4:1 (1961): 69-80.

<sup>2</sup> See Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, third edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 179. For two examples of this type of approach, see Walter Brueggemann, “Bragging About the Right Stuff”, *Journal for Preachers* 26 (2003): 27-32; and Donald Ackland, “Preaching from Hosea to a Nation in Crisis”, *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 18:1 (1975): 43-55.

<sup>3</sup> Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. Hugh Clayton White (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 90ff.

<sup>4</sup> We avoid the term “preaching prophetically”, both since it can be used to mean anything from rude speech in the pulpit to social action preaching, and also because, depending on the passage, it may not be our duty to emulate the prophet in his speech and form (see below).

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1962), 1:xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>7</sup> The term “covenant” here acts as a unifying motif for all the aspects of God’s relationship with Israel. It does not necessitate a “covenantal” view of theology. See below for a discussion of how theological differences may impact one’s use of this model.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy R. Sensing, “A Call to Prophetic Preaching”, *Restoration Quarterly* 41 no 3 (1999): 139-154.

<sup>9</sup> Note that while this holds true for the majority of the prophetic corpus, a different approach is needed for the prophets’ oracles against foreign nations, which were not under the same covenant promises. Achtemeier argues that it is these non-covenantal prophecies which most directly apply to modern-day nations like the United States. Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching From the Old Testament* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 135. Tom Nelson demonstrates this approach from Jeremiah in his sermon *Lord of the Nations*, Denton Bible Church [iTunes podcast]: 12/14/2008.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Heschel 1:195-220.

<sup>11</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 169-172.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the “lesson” at the end of Joseph’s story (Genesis 50:20), or the moral commentary on the tragedies in Judges (21:25).

<sup>13</sup> For two recent treatments of this idea in relation to OT prophets, see John H. Sailhamer, “Preaching from the Prophets”, in Scott M. Gibson, ed., *Preaching the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 115-136; and Christopher R. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). I rely heavily on their insights in the following discussion.

<sup>14</sup> Sailhamer 122ff, is particularly strong on this point.

<sup>15</sup> Greidanus 167-8.

<sup>16</sup> Donald E. Gowan, *Reclaiming the Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 122-126.

<sup>17</sup> I am not minimizing the very significant differences between these perspectives, but am simply saying that this model would work from either perspective. In fact, thinking along the lines of covenant arrangements might be a fruitful avenue for discussion of these important issues.

<sup>18</sup> Haddon Robinson, “The Heresy of Application: An Interview with Haddon Robinson”, *Leadership* 18 (Fall 1997): 20-27.

<sup>19</sup> The following are two additional examples of sermons that follow this basic approach: Al Fasol “Preaching from Malachi”, *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 30:1 (1987): 32-34; Timothy M. Pierce, “Micah as a Case Study for Preaching and Teaching the Prophets”, *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 46 (2003): 77-94.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Lessing’s insightful article on analyzing and using the rhetorical devices of the prophets. Reed Lessing, “Preaching Like the Prophets: Using Rhetorical Criticism in the Appropriation of Old Testament Prophetic Literature”, *Concordia Journal* 28 (2002): 391-408. For two good examples of vivid language that mirrors the

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prophetic tone of the passage, see Heidi Husted, *Stewards of Just-Us or Justice?* Preaching Today issue 253 [Audio CD]; John Ortberg, *Doing Justice*, Preaching Today issue 253 [Audio CD].

<sup>21</sup> Greidanus 260.