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Papers

Towards a biblical mind

The Old Testament prophets and human flourishing

By Tony Watkins

Summary

The Old Testament prophets spoke to a world craving meaning, much like ours today. They called out Israel's wrongs – broken relationships with God, people, nature and themselves – while presenting a vision of 'shalom': true flourishing. They showed how sin disrupts life and how God longs to restore it. Their words resonate with questions of flourishing in the contemporary world, especially Charles Taylor's understanding of 'fullness'. In a Christian reading of the prophets, they point to Jesus as the answer to our deepest desires for connection and wholeness in a fragmented world. This paper invites the Church to draw more deeply on the prophets and their message to commend the gospel in an age when many look for 'fullness' but cannot find it.

Introduction

In the modern world it is very easy to drift through a shallow version of life, experiencing fleeting pleasures, concerned only with the surface. Social media is designed to capture people's attention, but leaves people feeling numb and distracted. There is little room for wonder or depth. Fractured relationships – personally, nationally and internationally – seem glaringly obvious in a media world. Many feel disconnected from nature, yet fear for the environment. It is increasingly common to hear people expressing an ache for meaning beyond the immediate here and now.

How do we as Christians speak into such a world? How well do we use the Bible's rich resources when trying to do so? We often rely on ideas drawn from systematic theology and a limited number of biblical texts. What if we could show the relevance of all parts of Scripture, despite the cultural chasm between the biblical world and our own? My focus is on what is arguably the most neglected part of the Bible: the prophetic literature – the books from Isaiah to Malachi – which are the concern of this paper. Many Christians avoid them because they find the language difficult, the imagery bewildering (e.g. Ezekiel's wheels within wheels, Daniel's bizarre beasts), and the historical context remote and unfamiliar (e.g. Ezekiel 33:21). But the biggest challenge for many is the prophets' insistent emphasis on God judging his people for their sin. Yet the prophetic literature speaks into the void of contemporary life, offering not just critique, but a vision of flourishing that overcomes the malaises of contemporary western society.

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The prophets were brilliant communicators, using a range of genres, metaphors and approaches to reach audiences who had compromised their covenant with the Lord and failed to be faithful. The prophets argued that this waywardness caused a profound loss of societal wellbeing, or *shalom*, and invited divine judgement. They did not merely lament this decline; they dissected the flawed beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that fuelled it, exposing futile attempts at peace and prosperity apart from God's covenant. Amos condemned the wealthy elite for oppressing the poor, Hosea used his own broken marriage as a metaphor for Israel's infidelity, and Jeremiah railed against false prophets peddling false hope.

The prophets' messages continue to critique our tendency to prioritise self-interest over God's word. Their passion for social justice aligns with some secular western concerns, thanks, in part, to the continuing influence of Christian values.¹ Much that is written about the prophets in relation to today's world emphasises this social critique, viewing the 'prophetic' as a tool to challenge power.² It is social critique, but that is just one thread of the prophetic tapestry. Can we do better at using the whole cloth of prophetic literature rather than just pulling on selective threads to do with social justice?

This paper outlines a different approach: engaging the whole prophetic discourse by uncovering its vision of *life as it should be*. Even the sternest judgement passages imply a positive ideal – peace, justice, right relationships with God and others – that has been violated by sin. The prophets critiqued the 'culpable disturbance of shalom'³ – a breakdown caused by rejecting God's order and God himself. At the heart of their messages lies a robust theological framework that envisions 'the good', in contrast to the sin, failure and brokenness they addressed. Their harsh words stemmed from their overwhelming desire for God's people to experience genuine flourishing. This vision drew on Israel's traditions, such as creation, exodus and the Sinai covenant, but was also shaped by direct encounters with God.

The true prophet stood in the divine council (Jeremiah 23:18), hearing God's verdict on his people's behaviour and witnessing God's heart to restore them to shalom. This experience of being in God's presence and hearing God's words enabled them to see how various aspects of the traditions applied to their culture at that moment, and gave them the confidence to say, 'This is what the Lord says.' It prepared them to be countercultural, to speak the words nobody wanted to hear, and to tear the masks away, exposing the true face of the people behind them.⁴

The prophets' theological framework

The prophets shaped their messages from ideas about God and the world that had been familiar for many generations. The main influence on the prophetic messages came from the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai, along with the narrative of their rescue from Egypt, wilderness wanderings and entering the promised land. These events defined Israel as God's chosen people, rooted in the promise of

land, offspring and blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:1–3), forming the bedrock of their existence. The prophets repeatedly drew on this history and particularly on the terms of the covenant to highlight wrongdoing (e.g. Ezekiel 20:4–31) and to call people back to faithfulness (e.g. Micah 6:4–5). This was their fundamental role:⁵ they stood on Moses's shoulders, invoking covenant requirements and exposing how the people had deviated from God's standards. Their judgement messages reflected the covenant curses that Moses detailed (Leviticus 26:14–39; Deuteronomy 28:15–68; see for example, Ezekiel 5; Amos 4:6–10). Similarly, their promises of restoration echo covenant blessings (Leviticus 26:3–13, 40–45; Deuteronomy 28:1–14; see for example, Jeremiah 32:42–44; Zephaniah 3:9–20).

The second cornerstone of prophetic thought came from the creation and fall narrative (Genesis 1–4).⁶ God's goodness is manifest in the peace, blessing and abundance of creation (Genesis 1:28–30; 2:9–24). Human beings were to live in harmony with God, each other and their environment (Genesis 2), but rebellion against God destroyed that harmony. Not only were humans alienated from God, others and the land (Genesis 3), but violence distressed and defiled the land itself (Genesis 4).⁷ The prophets tapped this theme to celebrate God's power and goodness, which was accessible to his faithful people (e.g. Isaiah 40). But they also warned that his power over creation could be a danger to his disobedient people (e.g. Jeremiah 10:11–13), and his provision could be withdrawn (e.g. Joel 1:15–20). The people defiled the land by their deeds (Ezekiel 36:16–18). In response, the ground mourned (Isaiah 24:4–6 (ESV); Hosea 4:2–3) and trembled (Amos 8:4–8), echoing the covenant idea that sin could make the land nauseous so that it would vomit out those who defiled it (Leviticus 18:24–28). At the same time, the original perfection of creation points to a future hope, as in Amos 9:11–15 or Joel 2:21–24, where God promises Eden-like abundance. For the prophets, creation revealed God's intentions for a good life for humanity, and the fall showed how sin breaks everything – people, society and nature. But they anticipated a new creation, free from evil and suffering (Isaiah 65:17–25).

The third idea related to Mount Zion,⁸ the location of God's temple and the king's throne. Zion was where God lived with his people (Ezekiel 43:6–7; Joel 3:17), ruling via the anointed Davidic king (Jeremiah 8:19; Zechariah 9:9–10). Envisioned as a sacred peak (Micah 4:1–2; Zechariah

The true prophet stood in the divine council hearing God's verdict on his people's behaviour and witnessing God's heart to restore them to shalom.

1 Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (Little, Brown, 2019); Glen Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe: How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress, and Equality* (Good Book Company, 2022).

2 E.g. Walter Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

3 Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way it's Supposed to be: A Breviary of Sin* (Apollos, 1995), p.16.

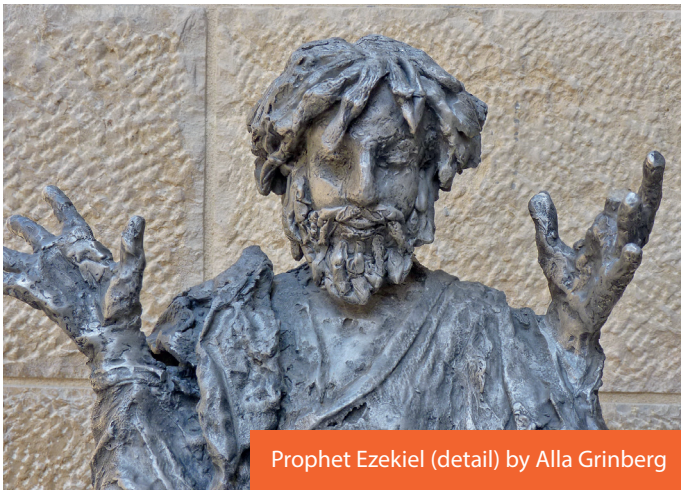
4 Hans Walter Wolff, *Confrontations With Prophets: Discovering the Old Testament's New and Contemporary Significance* (Fortress Press, 1983), p.35.

5 Douglas K. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Word Books, 1987), p.xxxii; Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I* (Paternoster, 1996), p.167.

6 The structure of Genesis, marked by the repeated phrase 'These are the records of ...' (Christian Standard Bible), reveals that the fall narrative constitutes chapters 3 and 4.

7 Matthew Lynch, *Portraying Violence in the Hebrew Bible: A Literary and Cultural Study* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), p.17.

8 I refer to Mount Zion, rather than just Zion, to emphasise its identity as a sacred mountain and avoid confusion with ideas of Zionism.



Prophet Ezekiel (detail) by Alla Grinberg

8:3; cf. Psalm 48:1–3) and a source of life (Isaiah 33:20–21), Mount Zion also symbolised God’s triumph over nations and kings (Joel 3:16–17). Mount Zion was such a powerful symbol of God’s presence and sovereignty that it took on eschatological importance as the focus of God’s restoration of the world (e.g. Isaiah 2:1–5; Zechariah 8:1–8).

Wisdom – living well in God’s world – rounds out the prophets’ theological framework. The prophets sometimes used wisdom-like themes (e.g. Isaiah 28:23–29), reflecting a mindset that would have been familiar to everyone in Israel, whether or not they lived by it. Wisdom gave advice for individuals within communities about the best way to live and the prophets did the same (e.g. Jeremiah 9:23–24; Hosea 14:9; Micah 6:9).

Shalom

Ancient Israel’s identity – its stories, ideas, and way of life – was woven from these threads, which are key themes throughout the Old Testament. They formed a major part of the prophets’ theological framework and shaped their vision of ‘the good’, for which the Hebrew Bible uses several overlapping words. *Tov* means ‘good’ in every sense: joyful, pleasing, orderly, and moral. *Asbrey* evokes ‘blessed’ or ‘happy’, as in Psalm 1:1. *Shalom* is often translated as ‘peace’, but includes security, prosperity, wholeness, wellbeing and flourishing. Most prophets rarely used the word *shalom* (only 74 times in total), but it is a useful term to cover all these aspects of the good.⁹

Shalom – life as it should be – was the hidden heartbeat of the prophets’ vision, pulsing underneath their attack on the sin that fractured it. The good life unfolds in four relational dimensions: with God, others, the world around and oneself. True shalom requires all four to flourish. Genesis 1–4 shows these relationships – God walking with humans in the Garden, relational harmony, wise stewarding of creation and inward wholeness – shattered by the fall. The prophetic critiques pinpointed these broken relationships, decrying the loss of shalom. Yet they held out hope for

wholeness, insisting it comes only by Israel rejecting false ‘pseudo-shalom’ and returning to faithful living.

Relationship with God

The prophets portrayed God as judge and redeemer, urging Israel back to relationship with him. They warned that unfaithfulness severs this bond, inviting judgement. For instance, Hosea likened Israel’s idolatry to adultery (Hosea 2:2–7), Isaiah declared that sin separates people from their Maker (Isaiah 59:2) and Jeremiah lamented Judah’s rejection of God’s Torah (Jeremiah 9:13–14). God’s earlier acts of discipline reflected God’s longing for their return (e.g. Jeremiah 14:10–12) and graver consequences loomed if they persisted in rebellion. The prophets urged their listeners to grieve this loss and seek renewal, for example in Micah’s famous plea to ‘practise justice, and to love faithful kindness, and to walk humbly with your God’ (6:8, my translation).

The prophets’ main accusation was that the people were idolatrous (e.g. Jeremiah 10:3–5; Hosea 2:13), even after all that God had done for them. Idolatry shatters shalom, as God withdraws his presence. Ezekiel’s vision of God’s glory abandoning the temple shows this as the worst of all fates (Ezekiel 10). Empty rituals (Isaiah 1:11–17) and neglect of Sabbath (Jeremiah 17:19–27) revealed the people’s faith to be hollow; they expected God’s help (Jeremiah 7:4) but faced judgement (Amos 5:18–20).

The prophets also anticipated a restored relationship with the Lord: a new covenant (Isaiah 55:3; Jeremiah 31:31–34), a new heart (Ezekiel 36:24–27) and new intimacy with God (Hosea 14:4), brought about by a new Messiah (Isaiah 53). The prophets’ message is clear: shalom begins with seeking God alone (Isaiah 26:3–4; 48:17–19).

Relationships with others

The prophets insisted that devotion to God must show in how people treat one another. Without this primary devotion, communities fracture. Micah condemned those who oppressed the poor and corrupted justice (Micah 2:1–2; 7:3), while Amos wept over dishonest traders (Amos 8:5–6), charging Judah with forsaking justice and righteousness (Amos 5:7, 10–13), the values meant to bind God’s people. Exploitation – both economic and sexual – abounded (Amos 2:6–7; Jeremiah 5:7–9), corruption was rife (Isaiah 59:14–15; Jeremiah 6:13) and violence festered (Hosea 4:2; Habakkuk 1:2–3). The prophets also extended their concern beyond Israel, holding all nations to a universal ethic of decency because, they insisted, God rules over all (Amos 1:3–2:3; Jeremiah 46–49). The prophetic vision of right relationships (Isaiah 5:7; Amos 5:24) reflects God’s desire for justice and righteousness, rooted in covenant and wisdom traditions.

The prophets also held out hope for restored relationships. For example, Ezekiel envisioned a restored

⁹ For comparison, James Davison Hunter describes shalom as ‘order and harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, and well-being.’ (*To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p.228.). Nicholas Wolterstorff

writes, ‘To dwell in shalom is to enjoy living before God, to enjoy living in one’s physical surroundings, to enjoy living with one’s fellows, to enjoy life with oneself.’ *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp.69–70.

and reunited people under one king (37:15–28); Isaiah and Micah anticipate the end of warfare (Isaiah 2:1–4; Micah 4:1–5); and Zechariah looks to a time when people of all nations will seek God together (8:20–23).

Relationship with one's environment

The prophets tied Israel's fate to their land, a gift from God which was central to his covenant (Deuteronomy 12:10). Sin caused pastures to wither (Isaiah 15:6), locusts stripped fields (Joel 1:4), and the land was laid waste (Jeremiah 4:23–26) – all curses for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:15–44). Rebellion disrupts God's good creation.

Yet the prophets also heralded renewal: deserts would bloom, streams would flow (Isaiah 35:1–2), grain and wine would overflow (Amos 9:13), all echoing promises of blessing (Deuteronomy 28:11–12). Exile loomed (e.g. Jeremiah 25:11), but repentance would bring return (Hosea 14:1–3) and peace (Micah 4:4). True shalom includes a flourishing earth (Amos 9:11–15), a sign of God's favour renewed.

Relationship with self

The Hebrew Bible rarely foregrounds the self, viewing Israel as a community, not as a collection of individuals. However, a relationship with oneself emerges implicitly (e.g. Psalms 42, 43). It lies beneath the surface of the prophetic texts. The Hebrew word *nepheš*, often translated as 'soul' or 'life' (e.g. Jonah 1:14; 2:7) indicates a living, feeling whole person. The word *lev* means 'heart' (e.g. Jeremiah 24:7), referring to the centre of the self. But every soul is distorted by sin and the heart is divided (cf. Ezekiel 11:19) in its affections and loyalties, and so at times there are glimpses in the prophetic books of the absence of inner shalom (Isaiah 38:15; 44:20; Jeremiah 7:19).

The prophets' hearers chased fleeting ease (Isaiah 22:13; Amos 6:1–7) but experienced no true rest. There is no shalom for the wicked (Isaiah 57:20–21). Broken social ties fostered resentment or envy, and invading enemies engendered fear (Habakkuk 1:5–17). Such feelings tie the self to God, community and world. Shalom includes an inner calm (Isaiah 26:3,12) and the prophets said that YHWH could restore his people to such a condition (e.g. Isaiah 40:1–2). The promise of a new, undivided heart (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26; Jeremiah 32:39) entails a new wholeness, including a new ability to wholeheartedly love the Lord. The prophets focused primarily on the first three relational dimensions of shalom, but their words stir the soul too: true flourishing aligns the heart with God's shalom and brings inner peace.

Flourishing in the modern world

Charles Taylor explores the idea of flourishing in the

modern world in *A Secular Age*.¹⁰ He sees a universal longing for ultimate flourishing, which he calls 'fullness' – a meaningful, authentic life that orients our deepest values. This longing, he argues, transcends time and culture, driving every individual and society towards a sense of purpose and wholeness. Fullness is an enduring human pursuit, a state we instinctively crave that sets our moral and spiritual compass, whether or not we believe in something transcendent, beyond the immanent frame in which we live. The difference lies in where we find it: believers might locate it in relationship with God, while nonbelievers often seek it within themselves. This is a significant factor in the rise over recent years in such phenomena as mindfulness, transgenderism, use of psychedelics and many other forms of self-discovery.

Many people have had personal experiences that hint at something transcendent: moments of awe in response to nature's grandeur or the depths of a work of art. In pre-modern times, such experiences readily pointed to the divine (e.g. Psalm 19:1), but our rationalistic, individualistic age recasts these as subjective feelings, not glimpses of truth. Taylor, though, believes they signify something real – outside us, yet personally sensed, and interpreted in diverse ways.

Fullness aligns strikingly with shalom in the four relational dimensions. Where the prophets lament a ruptured bond with God (e.g. Hosea 11:1–4), Taylor sees secular people haunted by, even longing for, the possibility of transcendence. The contemporary pursuit of equality and inclusion is both a reflection and a distortion of the prophetic call for a just community (e.g.

Amos 5:24). The prophets promised a renewed creation (e.g. Isaiah 35:1–2), while environmentalists strive for sustainability. The wholeness we chase in therapy or art is a pale shadow of the hope for renewed hearts (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26). The restlessness of the heart disconnected from God is a familiar experience in every age, and people long for inner shalom. For the prophets, sin fractures shalom; for

Taylor, modernity's rationalism and individualism does the same, scattering fullness across a fragmented landscape. Importantly, he identifies a lingering desire for something beyond the here and now to give life its ultimate meaning. The rise in popularity of witchcraft (especially on TikTok with the #WitchTok hashtag) and other forms of spirituality is just one symptom of this yearning.

Fullness is hard to grasp in today's world, which has tended to view reality as 'impersonal, mindless, soulless, impassive, facts or states of affairs' and in which technology distances us from nature's rhythms, others' faces, and our own hearts.¹¹ Many are stuck in a shallow version of life and are what Taylor calls 'buffered selves': they have insulated themselves from traditional moral or spiritual

The restlessness of the heart disconnected from God is a familiar experience in every age, and people long for inner shalom.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press, 2007).

pressures, but have been left empty in the process. That emptiness makes one doubt if fullness is even possible, or where it could be found. Some give up hoping for it, despite a deep craving for it. Many get by with decent-enough lives, preoccupied by work, causes, relationships that keep the emptiness at arm's length. It's not fullness, but nor is it despair; it's enough to keep the void at bay, with occasional glimmers of something better.

The media give us a vast array of expressions of how life is in a secular age. Films, TV dramas and other narratives bear witness to the longings for fullness, which are longings for shalom reshaped into secular forms (self-expression, progress, authenticity, etc.). These narratives do not merely entertain, but give us some vision of how life should be, evoking the contours of shalom, even as they may ache with its absence. Tales of love or freedom stir our imaginations towards a life of shalom. Why does a story like *Pride and Prejudice* entrance generations of readers and viewers? Because, while it shows us shalom being undermined by selfishness and foolishness, the story arc is towards flourishing as Darcy and Elizabeth not only fall in love against the odds, but grow as people. Media narratives sketch paths towards fullness through community (*Paddington*, 2014), sacrifice (*A Hidden Life*, 2019), the beauty of everyday life (*About Time*, 2013) and a variety of other themes. Such stories echo the deep hunger for shalom in every human heart, even though people rarely recognise it as that. The prophets and the secular age have radically different ideas about what shalom is and how to live towards it, but stories in the media help bridge the gap between the prophets' world and ours, reflecting that universal yearning for life to be made right in every dimension.

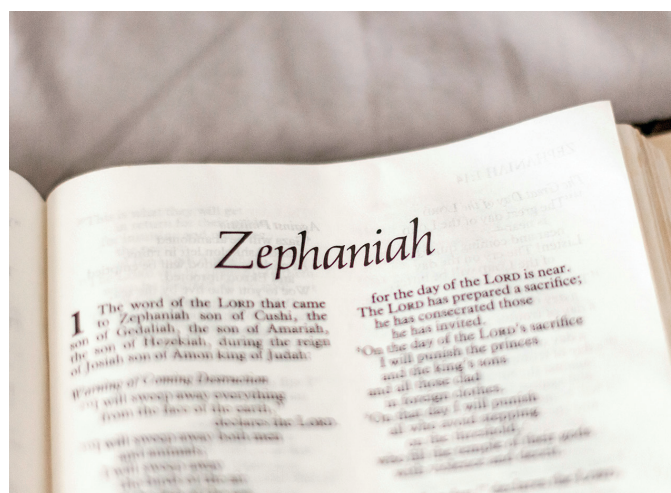
Making use of the prophetic literature

The prophetic literature, with its powerful critique and soaring hope, offers more than a perspective on ancient Israel: it speaks powerfully into our age. While they looked ahead to the coming of Messiah, we look back to see how judgement and grace come together in Christ. The Lord Jesus brings, not exile, but redemption (Romans 3:23–24), absorbing the curse so that we enjoy his blessing (Galatians 3:13–14). The theological traditions that shaped the prophets point ultimately to him: Christ is the Lord of creation (Colossians 1:15–17), our rescuer from slavery (Romans 6:17–18) whose death established a new covenant (Luke 22:20), God dwelling with us (John 1:14; 14:23), the Messianic King (Matthew 22:43–45) and the personification of wisdom (Luke 11:31).

This shift in perspective greatly enriches how we read the prophets today. Their fourfold shalom – with God, others, creation and self – finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. He reconciles us to God (2 Corinthians 5:18–20),

heals divisions (Ephesians 2:14–16), restores creation (Romans 8:19–21) and mends the soul (Matthew 11:28–30). We still await a final judgement, greater than any anticipated by the prophets, to purge all evil and usher in a new creation where perfect shalom will be realised (Revelation 21:1–7). The prophets, then, are not relics from a dark time of Israel's history, but heralds of a trajectory that is completed in Christ (e.g. Isaiah 60–66).

Taylor's ideas of fullness resonate well with the prophets' vision of 'the good'. Yet while people today often search for satisfaction in the here and now, true shalom is found only in Jesus Christ. This is a message to which people seem to be increasingly open. We are witnessing in the UK a rising tide of people who recognise that the fullness for which they long will always elude them while they ignore the transcendent and their connection to God remains broken.¹² Recent research suggests that two million more people attend church at least once a month than six years ago, with the sharpest rise among 18–34-year-olds.¹³ This is a generation which is angry at perceived injustice, concerned about the environment, deeply aware of the brokenness within, but clearly searching spiritually. The words of the prophets would surely resonate powerfully with them, cutting through the noise of our secular age. People who recognise the shallowness of the secular age often begin to 'ask about the ancient paths' (Jeremiah 6:16, Christian Standard Bible). The prophetic writings offer a way to reconnect, not just with deep ideas from the past, but with a vision of peace with God and each other, with the world and ourselves. The prophets' sense of God's transcendence and sovereignty over time and space is a powerful rebuke to today's preoccupation with the immanent here and now. Their insistence on justice, faithful kindness and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8) highlights the bankruptcy of contemporary individualism. Life in a fallen world is 'cross-pressured':¹⁴ we are pulled towards God and away from him, but the



11 Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Cascade Books, 2011), p.14.

12 Justin Brierley, *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2023). See also his podcast of the same name.

13 Rhiannon McAleer and Rob Barward-Symmons, *The Quiet Revival* (Bible Society, 2025). The biggest increases reported in the survey have been of

Catholics and Pentecostals, much of which are attributable to migration, especially from Africa. Nevertheless, the survey results also suggest an increase among non-immigrants, including a rise from 3% in 2018 to 18% today among 18–34-year-old white men attending church monthly, relatively few of whom are likely to be migrants.

14 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp.594–617.

prophets remind us that life is only found in one of those directions (Amos 5:4–5).

The breathtaking expressions of hope in the prophets (e.g. Hosea 14; Micah 7:18–20; Zephaniah 3:9–20; Malachi 4:1–3) give us ways to invite others to imagine flourishing beyond the limits of a secular imagination (e.g. Micah 4:1–5). In a world craving fullness, the prophets' message of a God who longs to lead his people to shalom allows us to bridge from ancient texts to living, obedient faith in the God of grace. The prophets, with their deep concern for living faithfully, provide rich ethical resources for living well before God, with others, in the world that God has given us and in our own skin. Naturally, we must be careful about drawing direct lines from the prophets to today (we do not live in an Old Covenant theocracy under the threat of exile). Yet pressing into the prophetic messages reveals a powerful picture of God's unremitting hatred of sin, which always has consequences, of his disciplining his people in order to bring them towards shalom, and of his overriding commitment to show grace in giving them the shalom they could never achieve on their own (Ezekiel 16:59–63).

We can lean into the prophets' skill in communication, too, making use of their vivid language, colourful metaphors and uncompromising messages, all of which convey something important about the nature of the God we proclaim. The media provide many images and stories that can bring prophetic imagery to life, from the desolation of refugees in news media (cf. Lamentations 1:1–3), to the idolatry of wealth (e.g. *The Great Gatsby*, cf. Amos 6:1–7), to the corruption of church leaders covering up abuse (e.g. the film *Spotlight* (2015), cf. Isaiah 1:16–17, 21–23; Ezekiel 22:25–29).

The prophetic message may too often be seen as narrowly concerning justice, yet that is nevertheless an important dimension. Such things do matter to God, but the prophets take us further and insist that humanity's most fundamental problem is our failure to see God as Lord. Our alienation from others, the world and our own selves all springs from our alienation from God. We can frame judgement as a gift, therefore: the prophets were

not negative for the sake of it, but used hard words as a positive force, a clarion call to uproot sin, turn back to the Lord, and restore shalom.

Conclusion

The twenty-first-century church needs to hear the prophets' words, and not be afraid of them. Embracing the way their words of judgement and hope are woven into the tapestry of God's actions from creation to new creation will help us to better understand all that comes together in the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to embrace the prophetic vision of shalom in all four relational dimensions, all flourishing because our relationship with the covenant Lord is flourishing. We need them to tear our masks away,¹⁵ revealing the shaky foundations on which we try to construct our pseudo-shaloms, and indicating where and how true shalom is to be found – in Christ who is reconciling all things to himself (Colossians 1:15–20). The exposing of sin opens the path to healing, not shame, and the foregrounding of the deep desires of the human heart enables people to see where those desires will be fully met.

Their messages of judgement bring us up short; their hope lifts our hearts. Through the New Testament, we see the shalom they envisaged, not as a distant dream, but as something that is breaking into our reality now and which we will fully experience in the new creation. The prophets awaken hearts to life as it should be: flourishing relationships with God, others, our world and ourselves – true shalom, life in all its fullness.



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¹⁵ Wolff, *Confrontations With Prophets: Discovering the Old Testament's New and Contemporary Significance*, p.36.

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