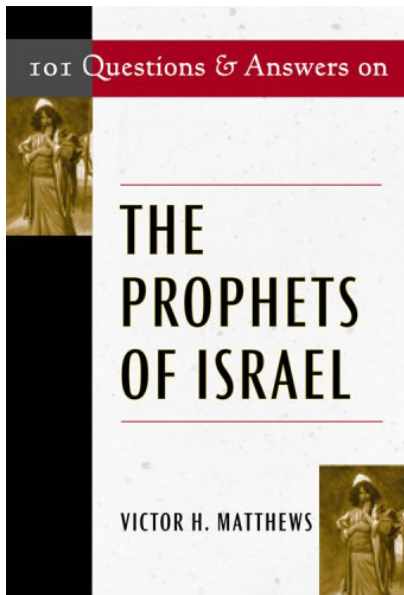


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Matthews, Victor H.

101 Questions and Answers on the Prophets of Israel

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In this volume, part of the 101 Questions and Answers series, Victor Matthews explores questions that provide both historical and interpretive insights into the role, message, and something of the social and political circumstances in which the prophets functioned. The author places the prophets and their message principally in their respective sociohistorical contexts, and in this regard one of the features of this volume is the ongoing discussion of the social world of ancient Israel. This is a significant aspect of the study, especially given the propensity of those who are inclined to interpret and use the Hebrew prophets without a sense of their historical context and circumstances.

The book is divided into eleven sections. In addition to the “Introductory” and “Final Thoughts” sections, and in line with the sociohistorical emphasis, Matthews places the preliterary prophets in the early monarchy period, and Amos and Hosea are categorized in the late monarchical period. Separate chapters are devoted to Isaiah of Jerusalem; Micah; the six Minor Prophets of the seventh century; Jeremiah, Ezekiel; sixth-century postexilic prophets; and fifth- to third-century postexilic prophets.

The opening section examines a series of commonly asked questions, such as the nature of the relationship between prophet and priest and the prophet and monarch. In this opening section, Matthews invites readers to imagine the prophet as more than one who

made prophetic speeches or hurled invectives against a people for its sins and in this regard points to the role of Abraham and Moses as intercessors.

In each of the prophetic books, Matthews focuses on the principal themes. In Amos, the emphasis is on social criticism and the extravagant but hollow worship; in Hosea, the emphasis is on covenantal relations and faithfulness to God. There are a number of pivotal themes in Isaiah of Jerusalem, including retribution, return, and restoration. In Micah, like his earlier counterpart Amos, the focus is on social criticism; for Nahum, the emphasis is on the destruction and fall of Nineveh. The principal themes in Zephaniah are the condemnation of oppressor nations and an apocalyptic vision of the Day of the Lord. The principal focus in Habakkuk is on the ongoing lamentation regarding violence and the accompanying wonderment regard God's role, while Obadiah encapsulates many of the themes found in the other prophets while giving special attention to Edom as a representation of enemy states.

In the case of Jeremiah, the author is much more extensive in his attention to the prophet's principal themes: God's judgment on Jerusalem; the issue of theodicy; and a series of oracles against foreign oppressive nations and the divine judgment that will be meted out. For Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, Matthews provides extensive commentary, dividing the prophetic life of Ezekiel into two periods: pre-587 and post-587. In the pre-587 period the prophet's focus centers on the watchman theme; prophecies of destruction; theodicy of the defiled temple; and indictment of the unfaithful wife. In the post-587 period, Ezekiel focuses on individual versus corporate responsibility; oracles against the nations; apocalyptic images; and restoration of the Jerusalem temple and the nation.

In Deutero-Isaiah, the author points to three principal themes: the absurdity of idol worship and the revelation that there is no God but Yahweh; the four "Servant Songs" that together outline a cogent theodicy of exile and the manner in which this is of value to both Israel and the nations; the use of Cyrus as an agent of God. Pursuing this focus on Cyrus, Matthews discusses the significance of Cyrus being entitled *anointed*, a title typically reserved for an Israelite. Noting the unmistakable interdependence of traditions, Matthews illustrates this with a comparison between Cyrus of Second Isaiah and Cyrus of the Cyrus Cylinder; readers will have a clear and complex picture of the striking parallels. In this short list of parallels, the reader is reminded that the Hebrew traditions, including the role of the prophets, did not emerge in a cultural or religious vacuum but in fact were shaped by a variety of societal and religious factors.

Haggai's principal focus is on rebuilding the temple and his relentless challenge of those obstacles, human and otherwise, that presented themselves. The principal theme in Zech 1-8, like that of Haggai, is on the rebuilding of the temple, although as Matthews points

out this is captured in a series of eight visions. The author discusses the role of the *satan* in Zech 3:1–2 as a theme to be reckoned with. This brief excursus not only lends insight into the *satan*'s role in this text but invites a natural comparison to the role of the *satan* in Job. Matthews connects Third Isaiah with Deutero-Isaiah thematically with an emphasis on a new age, especially with a return of the exiles and a restoration of Jerusalem, but Third Isaiah also has a fierce social critique of the leaders, for finally it is social justice and attentiveness to the essence of the Sabbath that will matter.

Three principal themes in Jonah are highlighted: Yahweh is the only true God, the creator God, concerned about the welfare of all people of the earth; those who repent of their sins will be heard by God; and God will change God's mind about punishment, including notably the Ninevites. In Malachi, Matthews sees adherence to the covenant as the principal theme, and this is a theme that is sharpened and outlined in six disputations in the book. The three principal themes noted in Joel are the outpouring of God's spirit; the restoration of the political fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem; and an eschatological image of Judah. Zechariah 9–14 has something akin to Amos's oracles against the nations and the promise of a ruler who will bring peace to all peoples, as well as a number of eschatological themes. As to whether Daniel is a prophet, Matthews notes that Daniel does not fit any of the conventional aspects of the Hebrew prophets, although he is an "interpreter of dreams and visions" and might be classified a diviner.

In addition to the "principal themes" question that Matthews explores in each prophet, he attends to a number of additional themes shared by several of the prophets. As an example, he pursues the question regarding the pervasive hatred of Edom in many of the prophets. Beyond the well-established argument that this is principally about ongoing fraternal conflict between Esau and Jacob, Matthews points to political issues such as border dispute and Edom's so-called neutrality in the face of Jerusalem's demise at the hands of the Babylonians. Another such common theme that one finds in a number of the prophets is that of the Day of the Lord. Beyond the fairly well known ideas associated with the Day of the Lord, Matthews, as in other instances in the book, provides a brief column of six prophetic texts in which the Day of the Lord is used. It is instructive to the reader to see these side by side and thus have a sense of the pervasive nature of this concept and the commonality of punishment that each carries.

Finally, the author also explores a variety of texts to illustrate aspects of Hebrew prophecy. For example, Nathan in 2 Sam 12:1–15 is viewed as an example of a prophet who accuses the king of lawlessness and in a way illustrates the significance of maintaining a balance of power within the political structure. In 1 Kgs 11:19–40 the prophet is used to show that God is instrumental in dividing the kingdom and choosing

the king. In 1 Kgs 22:5–28 the prophet is employed in a manner that seeks the discern “true” from “false” prophets.

This volume is pitched perfectly for the layperson, minister, and religious professional, as the author indicates in the preface. Given this focus, the book would have been well served to have a bibliography that included significant studies on the prophets by Abraham Heschel, Walter Brueggemann, Terence Fretheim, and Paul D. Hanson. Surprisingly, no volume in the very well received and accessible Interpretation series is included in the bibliography. This omission is accentuated by the inclusion of volumes in the Anchor Bible, Continental, Old Testament Library, and Hermeneia series, all outstanding series but focused more on technical scholarship. This omission notwithstanding however, this volume will provide readers a very accessible and thoughtful guide to important and relevant questions for our time.