

OT 501--Old Testament Introduction

Lecture Notes—Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther

--Megilloth:

--Ecclesiastes—	Used in the Celebration of Tabernacles
--Song of Songs—	Used in the Celebration of Passover
--Ruth—	Used in the Celebration of Shavuoth/Weeks
--Lamentations—	Used in the Celebration of Ninth of Ab
--Esther—	Used in the Celebration of Purim

Song of Songs

--Structure

--Song of Songs is written as a poetic drama, collection of songs, or something like that. Several characters are present:

- The Woman—Sometimes “the beloved,” she sings of her love & desire for her love. She is often referred to as the “bride.” Of course, the identification of her as a “bride,” & her lover as a “groom,” depends upon the understanding of the genre.
- The Man=Groom (Bridegroom)—Literally “the lover,” he sings the love & beauty of his love, the bride.
- Friends/“Daughters of Jerusalem”—These are witnesses to the events who also interact with the main characters. (As a drama, they are the chorus. As a wedding song, they are witnesses.)

--Form

--Drama

--Some have seen the Song of Songs as a drama, perhaps a ritual drama performed as part of a worship ritual, perhaps in memory of Solomon’s marriage. The problem is that drama as we know it is not really known until the Greek period.

--Allegory

--Early Jewish Interpretations saw the groom as God & the bride as Israel or individual people of God. In some interpretations, “breasts” refers to oral & written Torah or Aaron & Moses as the greatest ornaments of Israel’s traditions. “Kisses” refers to the giving of the Torah to Moses &/or the people at Mt. Sinai.

--Early Christian Interpretations also focused upon allegorical interpretations, seeing the groom as Jesus and the bride as the church or the individual believer. The “breasts” may refer to the old & new covenants, the old & new testaments of scripture. “Kisses” refers to God’s communication to His people.

--Why allegory?

--The desire to tone down the obvious erotic nature of the book drove some to find allegorical meanings.

--The desire to find a greater meaning for the existence of love poetry in the canon of scripture

--Love Poems

--Most modern scholars argue that Song of Songs is a collection of love poetry, which includes a variety of literary genres. As such, they celebrate the beauty of human sexuality & love.

--ANE Parallels--Egyptian love songs from 18th-20th dynasties (1300-1100 BC) are personal & similar to Song of Songs. Sumerian/Babylonian love songs are primarily related to the god/goddesses, esp. the goddesses Inanna & Ishtar.

Teaching/Theology

--The Song of Songs is not a book of erotic poems describing lascivious, promiscuous sexual behavior, or at least the contents of the book do not require such an interpretation.

--The book actually supports basic traditional restraint with regard to sexual activity, at least in 8:1-2, where sexual propriety is mentioned. The issue of forbidden love or promiscuity is not the subject of the book.

--Also, note the use of “friend,” “brother,” & “sister” to describe the lovers. They saw sexual love as an expression of their intimate care for one another, & presumably their desire to spend a life together. This was a relationship, not a fling!

--The Song of Songs celebrates sexual love & intimacy, pure & simple, at least on a literal level. Is this acceptable for canonical scripture? Many believe that it is. Many, however, believe that pure sexual celebration is below scripture.

Ruth

I. Outline of Contents

- I. Elimelech’s Family
- II. Ruth meets Boaz
- III. Boaz as Kinsman-Redeemer
- IV. Ruth & Boaz marry

II. Purpose of Ruth

- Shows another side of the period of the judges. It both concludes this period & introduces the period of Samuel & the monarchy.
- Shows the work of God in providing for David’s line. With the current conclusion, this would appear to be the point of the Book of Ruth.

III. Theological/Historical Themes of Ruth

- God’s Sovereignty—God is in control, even in a foreign land & even after tragedy.

--God's Compassion—God loved & cared for Naomi and Ruth. This is a common prophetic theme, that God cares for the widow & orphan.

--Levirate Marriage—The marriage of a brother to his brother's widow. This is not the role of Boaz, but the practice is mentioned by Naomi in Ruth 1.

--Kinsman Redeemer—This was a custom primarily to keep a family's inheritance intact. A near relative could redeem family land to keep it in the family. It also involved redeeming slaves from debt. Apparently it sometimes involved marrying young widows, even though we do not know of this part of the custom from the Law or any other reference.

Lamentations

I. Historical Background and Authorship

--Traditionally, Jeremiah has been seen as the author. This is because of the identical contexts of Lamentations and Jeremiah. Lamentations describes what Jeremiah (& other prophets) had foretold.

--The book is actually anonymous. Some of the ideas of the book do not conform well to Jeremiah, i.e. wouldn't he have reminded them of their failures that brought the destruction? So it is probably best to see it as anonymous, but to recognize that the position of Jeremiah would correspond to the author of Lamentations.

--The author of Lamentations probably was an eyewitness to the destruction of Jerusalem and subsequent exile. Thus, it is a vivid and especially painful memory for him (or her).

--Furthermore, the author of Lamentations was a person of deep theological (& philosophical) insight, recognizing the deep reasons for the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. Certainly Jeremiah would have fit this description. We simply do not have any real evidence for Jeremiah's authorship of the book.

II. Nature of the Book

--"Dirge"—funeral song—This is the form of much of the book. It is dark and painful, without much hope. The book is, in fact, lamenting the death of the city of Jerusalem.

--Acrostic poems-- Each of the 22 verses in chapters 1-4 begin with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This is a poetic means of conveying truth. It enables memorizing and increases the poetic depth of the book.

III. Summary of Contents

--Outline

--Lamentations 1-4—Four acrostic poems describing the utter destruction and desolation of Judah and Jerusalem.

--Lamentations 5—A prayer to the Lord for renewal to the life of blessings as known before the exile.

--Examples of Texts

--1:1-3—The reality of judgment and destruction is bitter. Even Jerusalem itself weeps for the loss. She is pictured as a deserted widow, deserted by those she thought loved her!

--3:19-25—The pain and bitterness are real and acute; yet hope and trust in God remain. He can be trusted because his love, faithfulness, and devotion never end—they are new every morning, even dark and desperate mornings!

Esther

I. Historical Background

--The action takes place in the royal court of Persia, in Susa, beginning in 483 BC.

II. Summary of Contents

- Esther 1-2 The king searches for a new queen, & Esther is chosen. Mordecai saves the king by reporting a plot to kill him through Esther.
- Esther 3 Haman obtains royal permission to exterminate the Jews, because Mordecai refused him obeisance.
- Esther 4-7 Esther and Mordecai save the Jews, while Haman is hanged on the gallows he built in his own pride and hatred.
- Esther 8-9 The Jews take revenge, and then celebrate Purim
- Esther 10 Epilogue on the important place of Mordecai

III. Theological Significance

- The celebration of Purim—Which came first? While scholars have argued both, the basic historical events of deliverance as a basis for Purim seems acceptable and preferable.
- Providence—God watches over His chosen people, even in a foreign land under distress. Esther 4:14 underscores this point, even though “God” is not actually mentioned.