

12. “Lots of Love”: Ruth, Esther & Song of Songs David Moseley, Ph.D.

After all the indignation and divine judgment of the Prophets, and the soul-searching, vainglorious satire and relentless intellectual pursuits of the Wisdom writers, we conclude this semester with three contrasting books about *Love* – Human Love...and the ways in which it mirrors Divine Love. The Book of Ruth is the story of the love and devotion between a Jewish mother and her Gentile daughter-in-law; the Book of Esther is a tale of a beautiful queen who saves her people from genocide at the hands of a foreign empire; and the Song of Songs... *well?! ...this book is a collection of intense, graphic Eastern erotic poems celebrating the joys of sexual and marital bliss.* All three books have certain themes in common: (1) Uniquely among Hebrew Bible texts, they have female characters as the lead figures, or at the heart of the stories, and seem to reflect a female authorial perspective. (2) They all share an interest in and concern with what is “Foreign” – Ruth is a Moabite living in Israel, Esther is an Israelite living in Persia, and there is textual evidence that (some of) the women in Song of Songs are foreign wives. (3) There is no mention of the word “God” in Esther and Song of Songs, and just two short passing references to God in the first two chapters of Ruth. The third point grounds these stories as very *human* in their expression of universal concerns and needs and wants – but the dilemma for exegetes is always: *Where is God in these texts?*

Assignment #12 for Class on Saturday 1st December 2018

Reading

Please read through the books of Ruth, Esther and the Song of Songs, including the Introductions to the books in your NRSV Bible. Use the annotations and notes as an aid to understanding and interpretation when you feel in need. In terms of genre, Ruth and Esther both read as self-contained novellas (Esther may be a work of historical fiction); whereas Song of Songs inhabits the world of Near Eastern Erotic Love Poetry - it may be a collection of Wedding Songs, scripted as a dialogue between two lovers, that is pseudonymously attributed to King Solomon (notorious for his 700 wives and 300 concubines).

Thinking & Responding

For this last Assignment, please pick **one** of the narrative texts (*either Ruth or Esther*), and compare and contrast the portrait of Love in that text with the portrait of Love in Song of Songs. In approximately 500 Words, think about and reflect on the different sorts of Human Love portrayed in these stories (mother-daughter, queen-king, husband-wife, sexual partners, love of your tribe / ethnic group, love of humanity), and how that enlightens our Understanding of Divine Love. In particular, given the celebratory content of Song of Songs, and the distortions of womanhood and female sexuality often portrayed in the Hebrew Bible (temptresses leading men astray – e.g. Eve, Tamar, Delilah, Bathsheba, Jezebel, etc.), how do these texts reframe our perspective? Should we resist the attempt to “Allegorize” – and thus, “Dehumanize” – the Song of Songs? Please type up and print your Reflections (12-point font, double-spaced, one-inch margin, with your name at the top of the paper), and be ready to share and discuss your Insights in class. I will collect them in to review and grade at the end of the class.