

THE PEASANTS, THE LOVERS, THE SAGE, THE VANQUISHED, AND THE  
QUEEN: IS THERE GOOD NEWS FOR THE POOR IN THE MEGILLOT?

Joseph E. Coleson  
Roberts Wesleyan College  
Rochester, New York, U.S.A.

Exegetes and commentators easily find good news for the poor in the Torah and the Prophets. The Torah demands justice for the members of society who otherwise would be without the protection of the law--the widowed, the fatherless, the Hebrew slave, the resident alien all are prominently mentioned. The prophets gained a large measure of their fame as thundering doomsayers for their oracles of judgment upon the advantaged classes of Israel and Judah, because of their habit of denying to these poor the justice mandated to them in the Torah.

But what of the Kethubim? Most would agree that these concerns may be found in various of the Psalms; certainly, the suffering of the righteous poor falls within the purview of the universally pondered question of the book of Job. And Proverbs has something to say about wisdom and the poor, whether one is poor, or is dealing with the poor. But even in these books, where the commendation of right actions toward the poor is obvious, biblical students usually direct their attention elsewhere.

When it comes to that delightful, stunning, and unparalleled collection within the Writings, the Megillot, one can hardly find a sentence suggesting that any of these five books is concerned with

good news for the poor. The only exception (that I have found) is the treatment of the themes in Ruth of the reversal of Naomi's fortune, and the acceptance of Ruth, the Moabite widow of Mahlon, into the people of Israel through her marriage to Boaz.

#### TWO PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Before proceeding further, we must give attention briefly to two questions. The first is, "Who are the poor?" Usually, when we think of the poor, we think of the economically disadvantaged, and certainly they are included in the biblical understanding of the poor. Such provisions as the laws of gleaning and the substitution of less costly sacrifices--doves for sheep--on the part of the poor householder demonstrate the concern for the economically disadvantaged in the world view set forth in the Tanak.

But there is more. The witness of the Tanak is not that the widow, the orphan, and the ger were included among those whose rights must be especially safeguarded because they were without economic resources. Indeed, they may have had resources, as, for example, Naomi and Abigail did. They are included because they were without legal standing, and therefore without legal recourse through the courts. The stance of the Tanak is essentially that God became the sponsor of such persons in the courts, the guarantor of their legal rights.

In this way the definition of the poor is simultaneously broadened and sharpened. Being poor is not a matter of economic standing only, but of social and legal standing and of religious

rights within the covenant community, as well. Jesus' statement that human beings do not live by bread alone is a crystallization of this principle in a different context. When one is deprived of any of these, one is, to that extent, one of the poor who are a special concern of the Tanak, in its letter and in its spirit. Anyone denied the right to participate fully in the community of faith is regarded as one of the poor; the concern of the Tanak is to remove such restraints from all who experience them.

Our second prolegomenon is to suggest that the five Megillot may be regarded and analyzed as story and response. (Of course, this is not the only approach that may be taken, but it is a useful one.) This is obvious in the cases of Ruth and Esther. The Song also makes sense as a dramatic plot, though not, of course, as a fully developed drama such as we know from ancient Greece. The plot is moved along primarily by means of the love poetry of the Shulammite and her village swain, with Solomon as the attempted rival for the affections of the maiden. (This is not to say, of course, that the Song is history, or is from Solomon's time.)

I take Qohelet to be in the form of a report by a sage on his philosophical/pragmatic enquiry into the meaning of life. The various manners of life Qohelet lived in the course of his investigations, and his ruminations on their potential for long-term satisfaction of the seeker-after-fulfillment, make up the "story." Even Lamentations is part of the story of the grief of the survivors of Jerusalem's tragic end at Nebuchadnezzar's hands.

Of course, there is more to a full understanding of the

Megillot than viewing them as story. But in so doing we gain insights that otherwise might not occur to us. Story invites the hearer/reader to reflect, to become involved, to identify with the protagonists, even to consider the implications of the story for one's own life and the life of the community, usually in a non-judgmental, non-threatening, even an interesting and entertaining, encounter. Though stories are culture-, time-, and place-specific, their ability to elicit a response from the hearer/reader transcends boundaries of culture, time, and place.

Wesleyans always have held that a part of the revelatory process of Scripture is the enabling of the hearer/reader to respond in redemptive ways to the encounter with the Word. Wesleyanism has anticipated some canons of the reader-response school of interpretation, though most Wesleyan interpreters would argue, contra many reader-response critics, that a text's meaning(s) is/are not decided solely on the basis of the current reader's/readers' response(s) to it. Part of the greatness of the Megillot lies in the magnetism of their stories, in their power to draw forth, through the centuries, genuine redemptive responses from the hearer/reader.

#### THE SAGE, THE VANQUISHED, AND THE QUEEN

Qohelet, Lamentations, and Esther we shall examine relatively briefly to suggest some (not all) of the ways they proclaim good news to the poor. Much more could be done with each.

Qohelet

Qohelet does not seem, at first glance, to be good news for anyone! Yet the twenty-seven occurrences of the phrase "under the sun" (and three uses of the equivalent "under heaven") clearly mark the arena of Qohelet's scientific enquiry. If life is lived "under the sun," (without regard for the Deity), then life in the end is "vanity of vanities," and "striving after wind," no matter what manner of life one has chosen to live. Qohelet's conclusion is that one must look, as it were, "above the sun." That is, life lived by taking God into account gives life meaning it otherwise cannot have. That can be good news for everyone.

Qohelet actually comments on oppression of the poor and the powerless (e.g., 4:1; 5:8); again, on the surface, his attitude is one of cynicism and existential despair. But we must give Qohelet credit for being a realist. It is not good news for the poor to tell them that they really are not poor, or that oppression does not exist, or that it doesn't matter because it is only temporal.

Qohelet acknowledges that poverty and oppression do exist, and that many times not much is done about it. But Qohelet recognizes also that poverty and oppression, limiting as they are in many ways, do not define the human condition. In one sense, Qohelet seems to say, the oppressed are better off than their oppressors, because the oppressors are doomed to much greater disappointment and disillusionment in the end.

Qohelet does not say that poverty and oppression are good. He does say that wealth brings the wealthy no lasting good, and may do

them harm. He does say that power and oppression bring oppressors no lasting good, and in the end (if not "under the sun") must do them greater harm than they have done to those they have oppressed. In bearing up under poverty or injustice that one can neither escape nor mitigate, this is good news for the spirit, if not for the body. It is only a part of the picture, but it is a part.

### Lamentations

Lamentations is carried along on the conviction that, ultimately, God will take up the cause of the vanquished, redeeming and restoring them, though now they are the poorest of the poor. Oppression by a conquering people will not continue forever.

We should observe that the very fact that someone noticed, cared, and grieved was/is good news. The destruction of Jerusalem did not go unchronicled or unmourned. If it was noticed, who knew? One even may have dared to hope that Jerusalem could be restored.

We must take account of the fact that Jerusalem's destruction is attributed to God, though foreign enemies are acknowledged as the agents of God's judgment. Of course, not all poverty and oppression are the result of one's (or a people's) own sin or errant judgment. But this poet recognized that this people's calamity was their own responsibility. The Lord had brought this judgment upon them; the Lord could undo it. That is hopeful. There is even a sense in Lamentations that one is better off under the hand of God's justice and God's sovereignty than at the mercy of unmerciful human enemies.

Just before the structural center of the book, the poet begins to express the return of hope, in the aftermath of one of the greatest disasters to overtake any people. Most of Jerusalem's inhabitants had died--by the sword, by disease, or by famine. The poet alludes twice to the fact that mothers had eaten their own infants in their efforts to avoid starvation. Yet, based on remembering the lovingkindnesses (hesed) and compassions (raham) of God (3:22), the poet places here a lengthy and eloquent rehearsal of God's goodness, God's care, and God's sovereignty. Though physical wholeness and material prosperity would take longer in returning to the survivors of Jerusalem, this was good news, health-giving and rejuvenating, for the emotions, the spirit, the intellect, and the will.

Finally (for this sketch), it is good news for the poor that God is concerned to redress injustices and will take vengeance on behalf of God's people against their enemies (4:22). This is not revenge for the sake of revenge. It is the redress of wrongs, the making straight what has been crooked, the restoring of the poor and the oppressed to their rightful place in God's creation.

### Esther

Esther suggests that the poor may look forward not only to deliverance, but to triumph<sup>?</sup>. Many commentators have suggested that the emphasis in Esther on the revenge of the Jews against their enemies is a sub-biblical sentiment and response. However, the author of Esther anticipated that argument, and pointedly noted

that the Jews did not enrich themselves with the spoils of their defeated and slain enemies. That immediately puts their action on a different (and higher) level than mere revenge.

Esther is a "morality play" which takes joy in the fact that the righteous do not always remain powerless. Haman is a representative of the privileged classes for whom everything always seems to go right, whether they are righteous or not. In fact, in the first half of Esther, the more wicked Haman is, the more exalted he becomes, in position, in intimacy with the king, and finally in privileged access to the queen, as he boasts to his family.

But Haman becomes a caricature of privilege as he degenerates, first into the buffoon, then into the pathetic defeated personification of evil. Haman's cleverness and hubris trap him into his humiliation before Mordecai. That by itself is comic relief and ironic satisfaction; the self-understood master of all becomes the fool. But Haman's wife sees it, rightly, as the beginning of the end. Privilege, wealth, rank, power, the ear of the king, even his ability to scheme for the throne itself--none of these, nor all together, protect Haman from his ignominious fall and death.

And this is good news for the poor. It is not that the poor must rejoice over the death of any person as a person. But individual persons, both individually and together, are the instigators and perpetrators of evil. Individuals, singly and in groups, carry out individual acts of evil. Individuals, singly or in groups, institutionalize evil. When the fall of evil persons from power means the end of institutionalized evil, those who have



been oppressed by that evil have the right to rejoice.

The story of Esther confirms and affirms our instinctual knowledge and feeling (both!) that injustice must not be allowed to be permanent. The biblical story is aligned firmly on the side of the oppressed; it invites (almost demands) our relief and our joy at their deliverance and vindication.

But the biblical story does more. Probably the most celebrated fact of the book of Esther is that, in its Hebrew narrative, it does not contain the name of God, nor even a direct reference to God. This is significant. The poor do not have to wait for miracles for their deliverance (though other biblical stories assert that God does sometimes act directly on behalf of the oppressed community of faith). The story of Esther and Mordecai celebrates human courage, ingenuity, even trickery, in the service of removing oppression and, if necessary, the oppressor.

#### THE LOVERS

The Song of Songs also demonstrates a high devotion to the rights of the poor, even when they are pitted against the desires of the king. Even if one interprets the Song as a two-person dramatic work, or a collection of love or wedding songs pure and simple, this right of any ordinary couple to satisfaction and joy in each other, without interference from authority figures, such as brothers or watchmen, is a major part of its emphasis.

It is in the themes and motifs of the Song, in its texture and shadings, and especially in the propensities, speeches,

actions, and decisions of its dramatis personae that the Song conveys its message of good news for the poor as an integral part of its paean to love.

The maid is the central character in the Song. Near the end, she is given the epithet, "Shulammite," which marks her as from the rural north of Israel, probably from a town in the Jezreel Valley. She is introduced as a caretaker of vineyards (1:6), and as a shepherd (1:8). This, together with every note or nuance of social station concerning her throughout the Song, marks her as a member of the peasant class, not destitute, but essentially without economic, social, or political power.

The Shulammite had been under the (somewhat overbearing) guardianship of her brothers; they had dictated her occupations (1:6), and apparently had monitored her movements closely (8:8-9). Now that she had reached marriageable age, and the king (or one of his attendants) had seen her, she was brought (some have suggested kidnapped) to the king's palace in Jerusalem. When she went into the streets alone one night in search of her village lover, she was accosted and manhandled by the city watchmen (5:7).

We should not overlook or minimize these infringements. Yet the Song itself comes very close to dismissing them as minor inconveniences. The Song and its female protagonist emphasize her freedom to order her own life. The Shulammite was courted ardently by two suitors, but neither violated her person; both respected her will and her right to choose between them. She celebrated and pursued her village lover, and ultimately rejected the king. We

may presume that had she chosen neither, the king and her lover would have respected that decision, too.

This is a remarkable portrait from an age when arranged marriages were the norm, and many young women would have jumped at the chance to be a member of the king's harem. It is a declaration of foundational values, a recognition that the glamour and glitter of court life was, in fact, only a veneer, a facade. It is a statement that the simple life of the land, life lived by one's own resources, is preferable to the gaudiness and luxury of a life paid for by the toil, sweat, and sorrow of others. It is a rejection of power, made possible by recognition of the human cost of power.

The rustic shepherd is perhaps not quite so sympathetically drawn a figure in this drama. Yet he stood to lose a great deal if the king's blandishments were successful. In the contest with the king for the Shulammit's affections, he possessed no weapon or advantage of his own. Only their relationship, remembered by her from a distance through part of this period, would prove to be strong enough (or not strong enough) that she would choose him over the king.

That the Shulammit did choose the shepherd over the king is, of course, an affirmation of the rights of those without political power. The Israelite system of monarchy under the Torah prohibited the king from acting above the law; Torah functioned as constitution. Of course, not all the kings of Israel and Judah obeyed the Torah in this regard, but the Song presents the king as respecting its strictures.

In so doing, the king becomes a sympathetic character in the Song, even a "poor" person. He lost the Shulammitte and her love; it is for love that a man might be willing to "give all the wealth of his house (8:7)." Without love, a rich man, even a king, well may be considered poor. In a time and place where their right to choose each other was sacrosanct, the shepherd and the Shulammitte were rich. The Song evokes the elemental forces of fire, water, and death to portray the strength of love (8:6-7); their love would outlast material wealth and power, even that of the king.

With its view of the relative (not absolute) power of a king over his subjects, the Song is a revolutionary and a subversive text. Monarchs reign, not to oppress their subjects, but to protect and guarantee their security and happiness, even if that should be established at the expense of the monarch himself.

The land, its flora and fauna are famous in the Song. Its evocation and celebration of the pastoral scene further buttress the right of everywoman and everyman to live unmolested by those who control the levers of political, economic and social power. The Song presents the garden, the orchard, the field, the pasture and the forest as the normal world. The king, his court, his men-at-arms, even the splendors of the capital city, are intruders and irritants, at best disruptive, at worst, dangerous. Small wonder that Rabbi Akiba, the shepherd, the most famous ancient exegete of the Song, supported the revolt of Bar Kochba against the imperial might of Rome.

The Song affirms the land and the community of the land

against those forces which would despoil and disrupt them. It envisions the reversal of the expulsion from the primeval Garden. It engenders hope for the redemption of the land and its people from the destructive oppression which the inhabitants of palaces have exercised upon it. In presenting such a vision, the Song presents good news for the poor.

#### THE PEASANTS

Ruth demonstrates that to be poor is not to be without dignity, both as a human being and as a member of community. Ruth's story both urges and models the acceptance and integration into the community of the outsider and the economically disadvantaged. This has been recognized in the study of the book of Ruth for a long time. What goes too often unnoticed (or at least unexplained) is the plethora and the strength of the ways the artistry of the book advances these ideas.

First, we may note the unlikelihood of such a story attaining significance. Whether historical fact or historical fiction, this is one thing the narrator wishes the reader to ponder. Harvests have happened all over the inhabited world in virtually every year since long before history began; in some places harvests happen several times a year. Demographers estimate about one million conceptions per day around the world. Even when earth's population was much lower, births were an ordinary, not an exceptional, event in every community through the ages. In all of human experience, virtually nothing is more commonplace than harvest and birth.

Yet this harvest and this birth attained an importance which stretched to the end of the Israelite nation and beyond. Even the ordinary doings of undistinguished people in out-of-the-way places may assume cosmic significance. Ruth's story affirms that even the outsider without resources or significant human backing is important, and may make incalculable contributions.

Commentators have pointed out that the writer continuously reminds us that Ruth was an outsider, a Moabite. This happens even when (sometimes) the writer has to go out of the way to do it. Whether in legislation, prophetic oracle, or story, the treatment of the outsider is an important element in Israel's righteousness.

One point in Ruth's liberated/liberating attitude, a point often missed, occurs in Naomi's argument that her daughters-in-law should return to their Moabite families, rather than accompany her in her return to Judah. Within Naomi's string of rhetorical questions is one that should be translated, "Would you therefore shut yourselves off from being to a man?" (1:13). Naomi's argument here is that Orpah and Ruth should not deny themselves the pleasures of sexual intimacy for the years it would take Naomi to bear more sons, and for those sons to grow up, even assuming such a thing were possible for Naomi; Naomi discounted that possibility in her argument, as well (1:11-12).

Women have the right, and should expect, to receive sexual pleasure from marriage, Naomi asserted. In our "enlightened" state, biblical scholars tend perhaps to take such a biblical affirmation for granted. Yet many women, in many regions of the

world, would find this affirmation in Ruth, and the celebration of female sexuality in the Song (among other biblical affirmations), to be revolutionary if they could be brought to bear, with all their ramifications, in their daily lives.

One important point in Ruth that commentators usually miss (perhaps because they do not believe the etymology is correct) is the bitter irony of Naomi's use of Shaddai in her complaint (1:20-21). Shaddai usually is translated "Almighty," and explained as derived from (Akk.) shadu, meaning mountain. Thus, Shaddai is the Mountain God, the Almighty.

But if "mountain" is involved in the etymological history of this word, it is only derivatively. Shaddai is from the root shdh; shad, breast, is also from this root. Shaddai means "the breasted One," that is, the Nourisher. As the mother supplies everything the nursing infant needs, so ultimately everything the believer needs is from Shaddai. Yet Naomi complained vehemently that Shaddai had "dealt very bitterly with" her (1:20) and had "brought calamity upon" her (1:21). If Shaddai will act this way, anything is possible! This (proper) understanding of Shaddai elucidates Job's many uses of the epithet, and Joel's pun (1:15), as well.

Naomi also complained that she had gone out full, but God had brought her back empty (1:21). However, Naomi's bitter complaining is not the end of the matter. The whole story is geared to demonstrate God's care for those who have suffered misfortune. The reversal of Naomi's fortunes in the birth of Obed is neatly portrayed by the reversal language of 4:15, with its employment of

the same root Naomi had used (shub), as well as a word (galgel) which is simultaneously a synonym of her former condition (mele'ah) and an antonym of her bitter self-characterization (regam), for which she had blamed God (1:21). God's actions were good news for Naomi, embedded even in the vocabulary of the story.

Only in Ruth do we find an instance of the law of gleaning put into practice. Sufficient detail of Ruth's gleaning is given to demonstrate that gleaning was a way to provide subsistence for the destitute in what was essentially a subsistence economy. (This is so even though Boaz was extravagant in his dealings with Ruth as she gleaned in his fields.)

(Gleaning has proven to be an important resource for food for the poor--at least in the U.S.--in recent years, as well. By some estimates waste in the field runs as high as thirty percent with machine harvesting. Gleaning can retrieve much of that wasted food, and make it available to those whose income cannot provide all their nutritional needs from the market. Unspoiled food thrown away by markets and restaurants is another source beginning to be tapped for "gleaning.")

Ruth also shows how the institution of the go'el worked. Boaz's redemption of Naomi's land preserved her land to her; his voluntary invoking of the levirate provision in his marriage to Ruth gave Naomi an heir to whom to pass the land.

The whole of Ruth's story in this regard is greater than the sum of its parts. The succor of the economically disadvantaged of the community, their restoration to and preservation within the



community, is of much greater importance than the accumulating or even the preservation of capital. This is driven home by the pointed omission of the nearer kinsman's name from the encounter at the gate in chapter four. The nearer kinsman becomes a parable--definitely intended by the artist who cast Ruth in its present form--about the importance of providing for the poor, especially for one's relatives. Precisely by his attempt to preserve his good name for and through his posterity, the nearer kinsman lost his chance to have his name recorded in the one place that would have guaranteed its eternal preservation. The writer made sure the reader does not miss that point; to refuse one's obligations to the poor is shameful conduct.

#### CONCLUSION

The Megillot are delightful and instructive on many levels. They are stories that give center stage to human action and interaction, and to hard questions about this drama that humankind finds itself playing out. When God appears in the Megillot, it is more often in the guise of Providence than in the guise of active Ruler. Yet (perhaps even because of its often indirect and artistically understated presence), God's "preferential option for the poor" is a strong theme running throughout the Megillot. God's people today need to rediscover it there.