# Study Guide to The Forgotten Books of the Bible

Edye Williamson Bender
and Robert Williamson Jr.

*With*
Chad Hornsby, Christine Donakey,
Miranda Donakey, and Jacob Turner

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# Preface

While we sometimes think of the Bible as a book, it is really a collection of books, each giving its own testimony to God's work in the world. In the church, we have a tendency to give most of our attention to those books at the center of the tradition—books like Genesis and Isaiah and the Gospels. But in listening only to the voices of those central books, we ignore others, weakening our understanding of God and what it means to be people of faith living in the world today.

*The Forgotten Books of the Bible* draws our attention to five of those biblical books too often ignored by the church: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. In the Jewish tradition, those books, known as the Five Scrolls (*Chamesh Megillot*), have been elevated to the status of festival scrolls, each being read on a major Jewish holiday. But in the Christian tradition, they have been all but forgotten. Most of us rarely hear them read or preached or discussed in church. *The Forgotten Books of the Bible* opens our ears to their testimonies once again, enriching our understanding of the Bible

and challenging us to think more deeply about what God may be saying to us about issues facing the world today.

As the author shows, these five old, "forgotten" books seem to speak to many of the urgent issues of our own time. Ruth challenges us to consider the perspective of an immigrant woman making her way in a foreign land. Lamentations encourages us to reflect on how the church can be a healing community for those who have experienced grief and trauma. Song of Songs invites us to consider how we might think about love and sex in healthier ways. Ecclesiastes asks us to ponder the reality of human mortality and to ask what it means to live meaningfully knowing that we will someday die. Esther offers us models for resisting the rise of ethnic nationalism in our midst.

As you read *The Forgotten Books of the Bible* and work through this study guide, you may sometimes find yourself in disagreement with the author or with some of the "competing testimonies" found in Scripture itself. You may also hear competing testimonies from other study-group members. We invite you to listen to these voices, acknowledging that your experience is not the only possible experience and opening yourself to learn from the experience of others. In turn, we invite you to share your own perspectives and story so that your testimony may join the chorus. As the author says, "What binds us together is not the conclusion of the Bible study but the process of studying the Bible" (173). Reading together in this way, may we all grow to understand God's work in the world ever more deeply.

# Chapter Discussion

# Introduction

While the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther have been elevated to the status of festival scrolls in the Jewish tradition, the Christian church has practically forgotten about them. Only rarely are they preached or taught—or even read—in most of our churches. By recovering and studying them, our understanding of Scripture can be made richer and deeper. The practice of listening with an open heart and mind to voices that aren't the loudest in the crowd can help us to broaden our understanding and deepen our faith. This study lifts up some of those voices and invites us to open our ears and minds and hearts.

1. What are your "go to" books of the Bible—the ones that you read or think about most often? Which books do you pay less attention to? Are any of these five books (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther) among them? Do you agree that these books have been largely "forgotten" by the church today? Why or why not?
2. What previous experience (if any) do you have with

these five biblical books (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther)? Do you have any initial thoughts about them as you begin this study?

3. What do you think might be gained by listening to these "marginalized" Scriptures? How might they enrich our understanding of the full message of Scripture? How might they enrich the life of the church?
4. The author describes his approach to the Scriptures and to others as being a "good listener" (xvii). What does that mean to you?
5. How can we practice listening to what these texts—and other people—have to say, rather than imposing our own ideas onto them? Which marginalized voices in your life and in Scripture could you pay more attention to in the coming days?
6. People see the world through their own set of lenses. Williamson notes in the introduction that he reads from a particular perspective as "a straight, white, middle-class, well-educated, ordained, pastoral, professorial male" (xviii). Through what lenses do you see the world? How might those lenses shape your understanding of what you see and hear? What are some ways you can explore what Scripture (and the world) looks like to someone with different lenses? How might that practice enrich your understanding?
7. Williamson tells the story of Donny's proposal to Fred at Mercy Community Church (xiii–xv). He describes

that community as a safe place where people can take risks surrounded by love and support. Where have you found communities of love and support? If you are reading this book with a study group, what would it take for you to feel safe and affirmed in the group?

8. After reading the introduction, what are you most looking forward to about the book? What initial questions or concerns do you have? What are you hoping to learn?

# Chapter 1: The Song of Songs

Williamson begins this chapter by looking at the struggle the church and American culture have had with healthy sexuality, noting that we often tend toward either sexual objectification or shame-based sexual purity. The Song of Songs invites us to explore a more healthy and holy view of sexuality and an appreciation for the human body. The chapter also explores allegorical readings of Song of Songs and how those different readings might be held in tension, giving us a range of possible insights about humans, God, and the relationships between them.

1. Williamson suggests that "the church needs to talk about sex, sexuality, and bodies in positive, thoughtful, theologically rich ways" rather than focusing on "restriction and repression, producing guilt and shame" (1–2). What has your experience been of the way the church approaches sex and sexuality? What do you think of the author's claim that the church needs to find more positive ways of talking about sexuality?
2. Looking at the biblical text and Williamson's

descriptions, what do we know about the Shulammite woman and her lover in Song of Songs? How would you describe each of these main characters?

3. Describe the relationship of the Shulammite woman and her lover. Do you see examples of mutuality and consent in the ways they speak and act?
4. Form two groups and pass out paper and pencils, crayons, or markers. Invite each group to read the descriptions of one of the main characters (Shulammite woman in Song 4:1–7 and her male lover in Song 5:10–16) and try to draw them, using the descriptors in the text to show their beauty. What do you notice about the standards of beauty that might differ from today? How do we determine what is "beautiful"? How might that vary, according to time, place, and culture?
5. The author maintains that the church has focused too much on biblical texts with restrictive views of sex and sexuality, such as Leviticus or the letters of Paul, while ignoring the positive view of sexuality in Song of Songs. How might Song of Songs enrich the church's conversation about human sexuality? How might it complicate it?
6. What do you make of the dangers that face the Shulammite woman in the city, and the response of the daughters of Jerusalem (21–24)? In what ways do these compare to the dangers of being a young woman today? Where might we see the "bonds of sisterhood"

that come to her aid in the modern world? Where in Song of Songs do you see threads of feminism?

7. Often Jews and Christians have read the Song of Songs as an allegory in which the male lover represents God and the female represents humankind (24–26). How does the allegorical reading enrich your understanding of God and the relationship of God and humanity? In what ways does it trouble you?
8. Williamson discusses the view of Rev. Marie Mainard O'Connell that the allegory could be reversed, so that the female character represents God and the male character represents humanity (26–29). How might reversing the allegory enrich your understanding of God and the relationship of God and humanity? How might it trouble you?
9. How do you feel about holding all three interpretations (love poem / allegory in which God is the male lover / allegory in which God is the Shulammite woman) in tension? Do you want to lean toward one interpretation or another? What can you learn through holding all three together?

# Chapter 2: Ruth

The book of Ruth tells a story of love, loyalty, and commitment between two women of different ethnic backgrounds, bound together through tragedy. Ruth the Moabite follows her mother-in-law Naomi home to Israel, becoming an immigrant in a foreign land. Ruth learns the rules and norms of her new society so she can provide for her mother-in-law and finds a future for herself in the process. Marrying the Israelite Boaz and having a child leads to Ruth the Moabite becoming the great-grandmother of David, the greatest king of Israel. The book of Ruth has much to say to issues of immigration in our world today. It also can open our eyes to the ways the majority culture may expect immigrants to assimilate in unfair or damaging ways.

1. The kind of self-sacrificing love that Ruth showed to Naomi is an uncommon act of commitment from one person to another. What do you think of Ruth's actions? Where have you experienced or witnessed this kind of commitment in your own life?
2. The relationship of Ruth to Naomi demonstrates the

power and possibility of lifelong commitments between women. What can we learn from these two women about relationships of love, loyalty, and sacrifice for one another?

3. Williamson describes the way Genesis and Deuteronomy depict the Israelites' attitudes toward the Moabites (35–36). How might these stories reflect the prejudices of Israelites against foreigners? How might they have affected the view of Ruth among the characters in our story? How might past history or old prejudices lead people today into being suspicious of other ethnic groups?
4. The author suggests that the book of Ruth, while set in the period of the judges, was probably written during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, when anti-immigrant sentiment was strong (34–35). What do you think the message of this story about a Moabite woman in Israel might be in a culture that emphasizes ethnic purity? How might the book of Ruth challenge those who favor ethnic purification? How might it be a response to anti-immigrant sentiment?
5. The book of Ruth ends by showing that Ruth the Moabite was the great-grandmother of David, the greatest king of Israel (59–61). Why might it be significant that David has a Moabite ancestor?
6. Williamson draws on the work of scholars Gale Yee and Yolanda Norton to show that while the book of Ruth may have positive intentions toward immigrants, it can

still be problematic for foreigners and ethnic minorities (61–64). What do you think of Yee's idea that Ruth is portrayed as a "perpetual foreigner" and as a "model minority"? How does Yee relate Ruth's treatment to her own experience as an Asian American woman? How do you think immigrants and ethnic minorities still experience this treatment today?

7. Yolanda Norton describes Ruth as having to give up her Moabite culture completely in order to be accepted in her new Israelite culture (61–62). In what ways have you experienced having to compromise an important aspect of your own ethnic or cultural identity in order to conform to the expectations of others? In what ways have you expected others to compromise their own ethnic or cultural identity in order to conform to your expectations?
8. Do you think immigrants and ethnic minorities are still expected to give up their own cultures to be fully accepted in the dominant American culture?
9. Williamson suggests that the book of Ruth invites us to make "commitments that cross ethnic and religious bounds . . . in which each person seeks the prosperity of the other rather than focusing solely on themselves" (65). What might such commitments look like in our own time? How do you think we might "create a community in which even Orpah could be included" (66)? What are barriers to such a community?

# Chapter 3: Lamentations

The book of Lamentations, written in response to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, offers space for anger, protest, and grief in the face of trauma and tragedy. It includes voices of multiple people who understand differently how God is acting in a time of tremendous crisis. By holding these voices in tension, Williamson claims, Lamentations does not demand that people of faith "get over" their anger or even agree on one way to understand God's actions. Rather, it invites the faith community to be a safe place for those who have experienced tragedy to be angry with God and to lament the tragedy of the world around us. Lamentations insists that staying together in community is more important than theological conformity in response to suffering.

1. When have you felt anger, lament, or protest that needed to be expressed? Were you able to find a safe/healthy way to express those emotions? Have you found that others are willing to sit with you as you wrestle

with these feelings? Or was there a need to gloss over them quickly and move toward positivity and/or hope?

2. Williamson says that Lamentations recognizes that "anger is necessary, that hope is difficult, and that being together in one community is more important than being of one mind" (71). How does this recognition compare to the churches, small groups, or other communities you have been a part of? How is it challenging to be in community with others whose voices, experiences, or beliefs are different than our own?
3. Williamson describes the theology of Deuteronomy ("the Deuteronomistic Theology") as "Reward/Punishment Theology" in which "God rewards people who are obedient and punishes people who are not" (73). In what ways can this theology be helpful for your understanding of God? What are some of its drawbacks?
4. Describe each of the five characters found in Lamentations (the Funeral Singer, Daughter Zion, the Strong Man, the Scoffer, and the Community Voice). Who are they? What makes them different from one another? How are they dealing with their own (or their community's) grief?
5. Which of these characters do you most identify with? Which of them do you most struggle with? Why?
6. In discussing the Funeral Singer, Williamson refers to Kathleen O'Connor's idea of the importance of being a

"witness" to the pain and suffering of people who have experienced devastation. He says "Rather than rushing them to resolution, we can walk alongside them. . . . We can let their suffering affect us—because we belong to each other—and we can weep on their behalf. We can believe them" (83). When have you been a witness for someone else's pain? When has someone been a witness for you?

7. The Community Voice of Lamentations 5 uses language strategically to create space for the beliefs of both Daughter Zion and the Strong Man, valuing continued relationship more than theological conformity. What might it look like for your community to make space for people with divergent viewpoints, whether theological, political, or personal? What would be the advantages to such an approach? What might the difficulties be?
8. Lamentations is written in the form of an alphabetic acrostic, using the alphabet as a way to structure and unify its description of the destruction of Jerusalem. Of the options Williamson gives for interpreting the acrostic form (99–103), which do you find the most compelling? What other ideas do you have for ways to interpret the significance of the acrostic?
9. Williamson claims that "Lamentations reminds us that we can give each other the space to speak, the space to breathe, the space to protest—without losing our common voice and without forgetting our common

humanity" (104). What do you think of this claim? What might it look like for your community to create space for people to protest and disagree?

# Chapter 4: Ecclesiastes

In a culture that encourages us to work hard to earn the "good life" of wealth and fame, Ecclesiastes asks: "What do people gain from all the work that they work so hard at under the sun?" The Gatherer voices our greatest fears: Are we spinning our wheels in pursuit of something that is just vapor? Will we even be remembered past our last breath? Is there really meaning to this life? The testimony of Ecclesiastes is not to waste our live on pursuits that fade with the mist but to enjoy the treasured moments that make each day.

1. The main speaker in Ecclesiastes, called "the Gatherer," asks, "What do people gain from all the hard work that they work so hard at under the sun?" (1:3). In other words, at the end of life, when all is said and done, what will it all have added up to? How do you think about the "gain" of your life? At the end of your life, what do you hope it will have added up to?
2. The Gatherer believes that no matter what we do or how hard we work, our lives ultimately add up to nothing. No matter how great our accomplishments,

we will die, and people will eventually forget we ever lived—whether in fifty years or a hundred or a thousand. Everything is a breath, he says (1:2), here today and gone tomorrow. What do you think of the Gatherer's claim that everything we do eventually fades? Do you agree that death eventually cancels out everything we accomplish in life?

3. Williamson suggests that no matter what we may think of the Gatherer's worldview, he does force us to "face the possibility that the things we are pursuing in life are ultimately worthless. They can't do what we want them to do for us, which is to make us significant in the face of death" (125). When you look at your own life through the eyes of the Gatherer, what do you see? What worthless things might you be pursuing? What things do you think have true value?
4. Besides his concern with mortality, the Gatherer also observes that life itself is unfair, since people often don't get what they deserve. He claims that "the righteous get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked get what the righteous deserve" (8:14). What has been your experience of life's fairness? Do you think people get what they deserve or not? What examples can you think of?
5. Because God doesn't reliably reward the righteous and punish the wicked, the Gatherer concludes that we can't understand what God is doing in the world. He says, "I observed all the work of God—that no one can grasp

what happens under the sun" (8:17). We don't know what leads to success or failure, and we don't know what God will reward or punish. According to Williamson, the Gatherer believes that "one must simply keep one's head down, try not to attract too much attention, and accept whatever fate God decides to give" (121). What do you think of this view of God? What about it seems right to you? In what ways do you think the Gatherer may be wrong?

6. In the famous poem of Ecclesiastes 3:1–9, the Gatherer depicts life as a series of opposite seasons ultimately adding up to nothing, since each season cancels out the other. Williamson suggests that, for the Gatherer, the secret to life is to stop asking what life adds up to and to start appreciating each season or experience as it comes, knowing that neither the good nor the bad will last forever (129–31). How do you try to enjoy the moments of life as they come? What makes such enjoyment difficult?
7. Summarizing the Gatherer's advice for us, Williamson says, "Love the people you love. Enjoy the work you do. Eat good food and drink good wine. Savor even the stupid little pointless moments, because that is your share in life" (135). Knowing that you, too, are mortal, how do you try to appreciate the "even the stupid little pointless moments?"

# Chapter 5: Esther

The book of Esther shows us the inner workings of systems of oppression at the heart of the Persian Empire. The king demands submission from his queen, and indeed all of the women of the empire, even as the courtier Haman commands a genocide against the Jews. The use of power to oppress is not news to us—all around us ethnic minorities, women, and others can attest to its existence. From Vashti, Mordecai, and Esther, we learn multiple ways to resist. We can use our voices, our actions, and our positions of privilege to change the power structures and lift up others.

1. The book of Esther wrestles with injustices, both toward women and toward the Jews. What injustices do you see in today's world? In what way do you feel called to address those injustices?
2. Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai resist injustice in different ways. Vashti and Mordecai make public protests, while Esther shrewdly negotiates within the system. What are the strengths and drawbacks of each method? In what ways do you feel most inclined to resist injustice?

3. Williamson argues that while Vashti's public act of defying the king seems to have failed, her example may have inspired other women in the empire to stand up for themselves (143–44). Do you think Vashti's defiance produced positive results, or did she simply lose her position as queen? Can you think of examples of others who may not have succeeded in the short run but inspired others around them?
4. In contrast to Vashti's public defiance of the king, Williamson says that Esther resists "by studiously following royal protocols and speaking the language of power" (171). Do you think Esther's approach—following royal protocols—as effective? Where do you see women (or others) working for change from within the system today?
5. In Esther 4:14, Mordecai says "But who knows? Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be part of the royal family." Can you relate to the feeling that you were in a specific time and place to do something that God called you to do? Tell about that experience.
6. The book of Esther does not name God as a force acting in the story. Instead it emphasizes the needs of people as well as the power of people to make the changes they wish for. Does it surprise you that this book talks about justice without specifically naming God? Can you think of examples of justice work in which God plays a background role today?
7. The Jews are successful in defending themselves from

genocide, but in doing so are responsible for the deaths of many residents of the kingdom (168). How can we resist causing oppression for others in our own fight for justice?

8. The major plot points of the book of Esther are all driven by women (Vashti, Esther, Haman's wife Zeresh). How do each of these women move the plot of the story along? In a book where the men of the day hold the obvious power, how do women choose to use their voices? What can we learn from their stories about standing up to power that is greater than our own?

# A Closing Word

1. What ideas from the book have stuck with you the most during the course of this study? What have you learned that you will take with you?
2. What points of disagreement have you found with Williamson's interpretations? Where do you most want to push back on his ideas?
3. As this study draws to a close, what is one commitment that you could make based on your reading?