**Megilloth.**

**The five “Scrolls”: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther, which come in the closing section of the Hebrew Bible, “The Writings.”**

In the most common arrangement of the Hebrew Bible, these five scrolls come together, following Psalms, Proverbs, and Job, and preceding Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

They may have been grouped together partly because they are the five shortest books in the Writings, but they have in common the fact that many Jewish communities use each of them in worship on one occasion each year. The order in which they are listed above is the order in which they appear in most printed Hebrew Bibles, and the order of the worship calendar.

Song of Songs comes first because it is used at Pesah (Passover) in March/April; this usage links with the way the Song is interpreted as a celebration of God’s love for Israel expressed in delivering Israel from Egypt and from the Red Sea and in meeting with Israel at Sinai, and/or expressed in the story of the relationship between God and Israel beginning at the exodus and extending over the succeeding centuries

Ruth is read at Shavuot (Pentecost), seven weeks after Passover, on the basis of the fact that the key episodes in the story take place during the period of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest (see Ruth 1:22; 2:23; 3:2), which comes to an end with Pentecost. Pentecost is also an occasion to celebrate the giving of the Torah at Sinai, and Ruth shows a number of themes from the Torah in action. These include the rule about gleaning and about brother-in-law marriage.

Lamentations is read on the fast named after its date, Tisha be’Av, the Ninth of Av; the month of Av overlaps with July and August. The fast commemorates the destruction of the temple in 587 B.C. and in 70 A.D., though the records concerning the precise day is confusing (for 587, see 2 Kgs 25:8-9; Jer 52:12-13).

Ecclesiastes is read at Sukkot (Tabernacles), in September/October. Sukkot is the last of Israel’s harvest festivals and an occasion of much rejoicing, so Ecclesiastes may seem an odd choice for reading at this festival. But Ecclesiastes does talk much about joy, and it reminds people both of the folly of rejoicing in things that lack substance (e.g., Eccl 2:1-2) and of the wisdom of finding a qualified joy in the good things God gives (e.g., Eccl 2:25-26; 5:18-20 [MT 17-19]).

Esther is read at Purim in February-March, in accordance with the instructions in the book itself (Esth 9:20-22).

There is a set of five substantial rabbinic commentaries on the five scrolls, which parallel the set of five rabbinic commentaries on the books of the Torah. Thus the five scrolls parallel the five books of the Torah. The set of ten commentaries as a whole is the Midrash Rabbah, the “Great Exposition.”

The five books invite readers to think about a series of five important questions:

* the significance of sex;
* a concern for needy immigrants;
* the need to talk to God about the community’s losses and failures;
* the acceptability of doubt, the fact of death and the emptiness of the things that we expect to give us fulfillment;
* the reality of ant-Semitism.

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*Midrash Rabbah*. 3rd. ed. London/New York: Soncino Press, 1983.

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—John Goldingay