**Dr. May Young, Comparing Laments from Israel’s   
Ancient Near Eastern Neighbors, Session 2**

This is Dr. May Young in her teaching on comparing laments from Israel's Ancient Near Eastern Neighbors, Session 2.   
  
Welcome back. So in this lecture and this time, I'd like to talk about the comparison between laments with Israel's ancient Near East neighbors.

So here, comparing laments, taking a look at the neighboring cultures around Israel, and seeing what kind of distinctions we might find in the Bible. So what are some similarities, which I'll point out some of that, what are some differences, and ultimately, here at the end, I'll just kind of summarize what we find in different cultures and touch on some of the similarities and differences. But at the end, I'm going to put, you know, what we can actually learn from these kind of comparisons as well.

And so, I'll do that at the end when we think about it. So when we're thinking about Israel's ancient Near East neighbors, who are we going to kind of focus on today? So we're going to look at the kind of here, we'll look at Egypt. We'll also look at Canaanite and Mesopotamian.

But what we're looking at when we're thinking about this is when we think about lament, a lot of times, there are sort of two main categories that we're going to think about here. There are dirges. That's kind of the way that people like funeral laments.

So, where people are mourning the loss of death, that's not the focus here. These are going to be more of what we see in terms of the character of the kind of supplications that we find in the Book of Psalms, which deal more with a supplication to the deity.

So here my examination was to see, you know, are these known in the culture surrounding ancient Israel? Do they, you know, bring prayers to ask for help from their gods? And what can we learn from these ancient Near East examples? And is there anything particular that we find in the biblical examples that is different in biblical laments? And how can that be instructive for us in this way? So we'll look at the Egyptian first and the kind of text in the Egyptian. Then we'll look at some Canaanite examples, or kind of, you know, what do we find here? Where are some similarities and differences? We're going to look at some, you know, thinking about Ugaritic as well as Hittite, and then here Mesopotamian, which is kind of dealing with like Sumerian as well as Babylonian, as we think about those kinds of texts as well. So, again, this is just a brief lecture on talking about, you know, some generalities of some of the things we'll look at in a couple of specific texts, but we'll look at, you know, what we find here predominantly.

When we look at the Egyptian text here, what we want to know is that there are not that many hymns and prayers dating back to the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom period. So you can see the periods here. So there weren't that many in terms of what we can find as parallels to the biblical examples.

But when we come to the New Kingdom, you actually have more comparable or comparable texts, but they're not necessarily like what we find in scripture. They're not like the laments that we find in the Bible. But there are things that we can see in terms of elements that can be instructive for us as we think about how these Egyptian texts kind of reflect their relationship with their gods and their prayers and their supplications and asking.

And so here we find here, even in the 18th Dynasty, the prayers are mostly hymns. So, they're characterized by excessive or descriptive praise. So that's very interesting here.

So there's not necessarily a lament or petition or declarative praise or thanksgivings in these examples or not too many when we see that. And that's actually very instructive or very interesting. And I'll point that out a little bit later, too.

But John Walton, Old Testament scholar, observed that while Egyptian prayers are full of praise, they do not contain declarative praise or thanksgiving. So there's a lot of just more of hymns praising God, you know, more about their nature and generalities, but not necessarily specific individual acts done on behalf of the praying person, which is what you actually find in scripture here. Kind of a lot of times people would actually even pair together laments and thanksgiving here in declarative praise in the Book of Psalms as well.

So, he is, however, quick to point out that this doesn't mean that they didn't have Thanksgiving prayers, only that it wasn't part of their worship in the temple and that they could have praised their gods on a more personal level. But it was not recorded as part of the official temple worship. And so that's something for us to keep in mind, too, as we think about that.

But in their recorded examples, we don't find much about that here. And so here in the 19th dynasty here, we do have some examples here that show that these prayers are still more hymns of praise, but they now contain a little bit more petition. So you might have seen in the earlier text that they didn't have as much petition to the gods.

But again, they're still different from what we find in our lament prayers in the scripture as well. And so here the difference here, I want to point out here is first that they usually began with extensive praise and blessing. So, there is a lot of praising of the gods that happened here.

And so the scholar Atmar Akil, who points out that rarely did Egyptians come with direct requests to the gods. So, they don't just come in and bring the requests. They usually came with praise and blessing and even petition and was eventual intention.

Even though petition was their eventual intention, those came later. So, they came at the end to explain why all the preceding praise was necessary. So, when I discuss this, I liken this to, you know, when your children come to you and they say and they say, wow, you look so beautiful today or, you know, you know, you're looking real good.

And behind that, they have a request. And so here it's sort of kind of buttering up, you know, the person or, you know, a parent or something like that to bring about the ultimate intention, which is the request. And so you can find that a lot of times within more of those kind of requests that we see in this as well.

So, there's also a difference in the sense of the admission of sin and seeking mercy from the gods is not common. So that's kind of interesting here, especially within Egyptian kind of writing here. So, if there is sin, the praying person describes their individual faults as a result of ignorance rather than sin.

So, in Egyptian literature, there's little disposition to seek divine mercy or to ask for forgiveness since the normal attitude was generally to deny having committed sin altogether, which is kind of interesting here in this way. Like so, you know, we find in scripture that, you know, the psalmist will come and admit sin or kind of freely admit in this way. But here you don't find that as much.

And perhaps this has to deal with the way that they saw the world and culturally. So, the kind of the cultural aspect here and this is kind of where the context of their worldview here. So what we find is in Egyptian religion, they emphasize this principle of ma'at or justice.

And so this concept held that the world together through the belief of act and consequence, also known as the retribution principle. So, when you think about the retribution principle, it's basically if you do good, you will reap good. You do evil, then evil is going to happen on you.

And so here this kind of act and consequence that's happening. And so here this is kind of shaping their worldview and how they view the world. And so if ma'at or their understanding of justice doesn't operate as it should, then chaos is that rules.

And so more specifically here, when we think about justice and ma'at here and cosmic order, as well as truth and balance, that's kind of what is thinking about here. So here, if that doesn't operate, then you have chaos that's going to kind of come in. So therefore, for Egyptians to admit wrong would upset the balance of their worldview, kind of the world here.

And to proclaim one's guilt was to admit contribution to chaos as well, and which would have detrimental consequences, especially in the afterlife and in the way that they viewed the afterlife in here. And so here, how did they contribute? You know, even for their understanding, you know, how in the afterlife their heart is weighed next to a feather, kind of seeing, you know, here, you know, how did they fare in terms of contribution to justice or to chaos in this way? So there is those differences. But you want to also see that there are some similarities that kind of come forward from these kind of comparisons as well.

So, one of them is kind of recognizing here is that, you know, who they're praying to here. So here, the sun god, Amun-Re here, that they're actually looking at him as a god who guarantees ma'at. So here, it's where the deity is actually guaranteeing justice in the world.

And so here, people can actually come to the god for justice. They can actually come and petition because he's the one who's the guarantor of this in this way. And then Pharaoh, then, is here the guarantor of justice in terms of on the earthly realm.

And so, kind of any of his enemies is seen as representing chaos or isfet in that sense as well. So here, anybody going against Pharaoh is going against the gods in that kind of understanding. So we see that also reflected in what we have in scripture here.

So where the Israelite understanding is a lot of times they can come to pray to Yahweh because Yahweh is the one who administers justice, you know, justice is in his hands in that sense as well. And that the psalmist can ask God to act because against the enemies, because they're ultimately against him, working against him and coming against the enemies in that sense. And so there's a kind of a similar mindset in that sense of seeing it in that in that way as well.

So that's a little bit more on just a kind of a brief discussion here on some of the similarities and the ways that the kind of texts that we see in the Egyptian ways. The second category with me, more of the Canaanite and more specifically Ugaritic kind of examples here. So these are kind of based off of discoveries from the late Bronze Age site of Ugarit or Ugarit in modern day Syria.

And so what you found there, the texts a lot a lot of times were more administrative texts or lists. So they they're not necessarily comparable to what we find in Lament Psalms. There were a few parallels in the text of the Old Testament, including the Psalms.

But these were mostly like narrative poems, not psalms or prayers in the sense that we have in this way. So as in my research here, there were two notable prayers, more specifics on that. You can find that in the Oxford Handbook of the Psalms.

It kind of lists that kind of extensive here, and what they see. But what we find here and their similarities is that a lot of times there's a shared poetic style with kind of use of parallelism. So, parallelism is found very extensively within Hebrew poetry here and basically it's a poetic device that expresses an idea through two or three lines by repetition, synonyms and sometimes antonyms.

And so, you can find that in the Book of Proverbs as well as in the Book of Psalms. So, a lot of times parallelism, this kind of poetic style, is also prevalent here in these Ugaritic texts as well. They also had similar themes.

So, kind of you to talk about divine kingship, victory over the enemies, divine counsel, and the underworld. They have some of those kinds of themes that we can see addressed in the Psalms as well. So, John Hastings Patton observed that some shared vocabulary as well.

And so here he kind of lists the kind of percentage that we can see here, but also notice that there are sometimes distinctive spellings or shortened forms that are different here. And so here you have a shared vocabulary, shared style, shared themes. A lot of those things are present here in terms of similarities to what we find in the biblical text as well.

There are also some differences here. And so here, Mark Smith noted that the themes in the Ugaritic texts were sometimes not found in the sense that their devotion to the dead. And so that was a prevalent theme for the Ugaritic texts.

But we don't necessarily find that in the biblical texts. The Psalms represent the Israelite deity as the god of the living and the living god. So that's a little bit different in how it's characterized.

So even in the similarities, there are also differences. There's another notable difference, and that is that these texts deal with the god Baal, and they place greater emphasis on a kind of mythical imagery. We find some of that in the Book of Psalms.

You do have, you know, God kind of, you know, writing clouds or, you know, we have some mythical elements within it. But definitely, they're more present in more of a mythical element here in these other texts as well. So here, scholars have also highlighted that the genre of here, kind of as we talked about genre in our previous thing here, they're not like the biblical ones.

And so they have poems that are a mixture that are different. And so they have descriptive praise, blessing the deity. They have laments and vows, complaints.

And then they're not categorized in the same way that we find in the biblical texts. So you're not going to find a one-to-one comparison. But they have, you know, some kind of similarities, but also some differences here.

William Hallow observes that the Ugaritic texts adduced in all these studies are neither hymns nor prayers, and thus can only serve indirectly to illuminate the category of biblical psalmnity as such. And so here, kind of thinking the same thing, you know, we're not going to find a one-to-one comparison, but we can actually still take a look at what we have here. Lastly, one of the most obvious differences between Israel's texts and her ancient Near East neighbors is the belief in a polytheistic worldview as opposed to the monotheistic worldview of scripture.

So, their neighbors actually believed in a plethora of gods and how the gods operated in this way. And we'll see a little bit more on how many gods some of them actually kind of petitioned to in this way. And so now moving into the Canaanite examples, more of the Hittite examples, so moving from Ugarit to more of the Hittite examples here.

So here, the Hittite Empire in modern day Turkey is kind of where we're talking about here, which shows that there were not many parallel examples to the Old Testament Psalms of Lament as well. But we do find some kind of similarities or some differences that we can see here. So, prayers from the old kingdom, around 17th century B.C., were more general in nature and they weren't kind of written in response to like specific or even linked to specific individuals.

So, the earlier ones were definitely more general in nature, and the kind of prayers or texts that they found here. And then, sometime after the new empire, many of the royal prayers were written. And so here, these are more specifically identified to specific people.

So, they named specific kings or royal family members who recited these prayers for themselves or on behalf of their kingdom, usually seeking help from different gods or situations, assistance against enemies, plagues, cure from illnesses. So they're definitely a kind of supplication to the deity is found here in these texts a lot more in this way. So, like other ancient Near East neighbors, the Hittites worshipped a pantheon of gods.

And so, this is where an example you can see one prayer here by Muwatali, the second invoked 140 deities of 83 different localities. So, we're talking about a polytheistic worldview that has a lot of deities in mind, which is very, very different from what we find, you know, in Israelite culture, in the Bible and the scripture, what's reflected there, only looking at Yahweh in that sense as well. So here I want to talk a little bit about some of the differences and then kind of look at a specific example that was cited here by scholars, and look at some of the differences and similarities in this.

So, one of the more notable differences in these Hittite prayers has to do with the kind of transactional worldview as they relate to their gods. So it's very transactional. Basically, you know, you scratch my back and I'll scratch your back and, you know, I'll do this for you.

You do this for me. And so, this is what I'm bringing here. And so Gwila Tori observed that this transactional approach in the prayers here of Mursili II's first plague prayer, she highlighted how the prayers promised to reward the sun goddess, Arena, with bread and libations or drink offerings if she eliminates the plague.

So basically here, kind of, you know, bargaining or dealing with the gods is kind of what you have here. Additionally, Hayes suggests that the Hittite prayers were quite literally arguments or strategies to persuade the gods. And so here the Hittite term for prayer is etymologically related to the English word " argument.

So aquar. And so, one of the Hebrew words for prayer, Tefillah, has similar judicial associations as well. And so here kind of thinking about this is an argument, kind of a persuasion to the gods to kind of act in this way.

And so here, while some of the terminology may exist in the Psalms of the Old Testament in general, what we find here is a very different mindset from what we have in the Bible. It's not a transactional mindset of what we find in Scripture. It's not that, you know, you scratch my back, I scratch yours here approach.

In fact, you know, even in the prophets in Micah 6, 8 here, which I presented here, it actually presents this contrary picture. So, the Israelites kept, you know, coming in with this mindset, even escalating to the type of sacrifices that they thought that the Lord wanted, and what God wanted was actually a desire for a relationship with his people and for them to walk in righteousness, humility, and justice. And so here in these verses, it says, you know, they come after, you know, the prophet has brought on all these indictments on them.

And then they come in response and they say, What shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? So with what? And so here, shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? So that's the standard. Is that what God wants? Does he want the standard kind of sacrifice? Is that what we have to do to kind of deal with the sins and the things that you've brought against us? Will the Lord be pleased with a thousand of rams, with 10,000 rivers of olive oil? So they kind of up the ante a little bit. Is this what he wants? You know, it's this kind of thing, and then they kind of bring it to the unthinkable.

So shall I offer my firstborn for my transgressions, the fruit of my body, for the sin of my soul? And so they're kind of, again, having a very transactional mindset of how they think that they're, that God is dealing with them. And this is what God says to the prophet. He says, he has shown you all mortal or old man, what is good and what does the Lord require you to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God? And so here are very different kinds of mindsets of what we find here, even with scripture, as opposed to some of those prayers here.

So, so back to the specific examples here. So, this is Rosili's first prayer to the assembly of gods and goddesses. And so here this is compared to specifically the scholar, who looked at it, kind of with Psalm 88 and 89, and observes the following.

And so, this is Christopher Hayes. So, in terms of similarities, both the Hittite and Psalms remain in darkness and lament to their very end. These prayers leave their speaker still waiting for divine intervention.

And so here they're still waiting. So both of them have that. Both the Hittite prayer and 89 has a strong royal character.

So here, kind of with the King, identifying with the King, as we saw earlier, talking about that. They have shared themes requesting help from the deity and reflecting on the deity's past favorable treatments. And so here is a kind of reflection of the past, thinking about favorable treatment here.

But the difference here is, you know, in Psalm 88, it's more individual in nature and it refers to the personal suffering and death compared to the Hittite prayer where the King is speaking on behalf of the nation and even functions like a chief priest. And so here he's representative of the nation here, as opposed to that kind of an individual nature of what we find in the Psalms, Psalm 88. And then in the Hittite prayer, it tries to distance the present generation from the previous one in order to absolve guilt.

So that's kind of interesting here. So they don't identify. They don't want to admit guilt.

They want to separate themselves from their forefathers, who actually are the ones who sinned, but they are kind of innocent in this way. And so here, the King Mursuli kind of attributes his suffering to the vow that his father broke. While the fathers did perform a ritual, declare his own guilt, the nation of Hatti remains guilty because they did not perform any rituals on their own behalf.

And so here he's making restitution on behalf of the land, but he also makes it clear that he's not done any evil. So again, this distance from admitting sins in this way. And so this is contrary to Psalm 89, which emphasizes the connection to past generations.

And there's no distancing from the forefathers. There's not, you know, they did wrong, but we're doing okay. You know, this is kind of identifying here.

So unlike the Hittite prayer, Psalm 88 and 89 do not identify the reason for the divine wrath. In other words, the psalmist is not focusing on making a kind of retribution, but imploring Yahweh to bring relief. So it's not about, again, transaction here, but actually about bringing relief, kind of here, for their suffering that's happening in this way.

So here, then moving on, then as we look at these last kinds of examples, here was the more Mesopotamian. So amongst all of Israel's kind of neighbors, ancient Near East neighbors, we probably have here the largest collection of prayers that could be compared to a kind of biblical laments, dealing more with Sumer and Babylonia. And so here, these prayers in the earlier periods of Mesopotamia, written prayers to the gods, were often inscribed on votive objects.

So a lot of times, you know, on bowls, in weapons, kind of in statues. And they were actually put in the temples near the deity whom they're trying to address. And so they would actually bring in items, actually, and inscribe on these prayers, on these items, in some ways to kind of act as a proxy.

So they were considered as taking the place of the prayers to be constantly in the presence of the deity. So, you're bringing this object because the person who's requesting this can't stand there day and night. They bring an object there to with their prayers to stand before the presence of the deity in this sense.

And so as time progressed, you know, these objects became too costly, you know, to find these bowls and weapons and these things here. And so the person, you know, praying, started writing these prayers and letters and kind of had more letters. And they wrote them to the deity, and they left them in the temple instead as well.

And so scholars have identified as many as nine different types of prayers. And so in my book, you can see here on pages 43 and 44 for specifics of the different kinds of prayers that were, you know, found and the different types that were found in that way, and how they've been identified. So, another aspect that should be noted is that just as those who approach the human ruler would not come empty-handed.

So many of the Sumerian and Babylonian prayers were also accompanied by rituals. So they not only just by bringing in like these statues or things with the prayers, they're actually bringing in sacrifices or gifts to appease the gods so that the requests would be granted. And so here these rituals were given to like motivate the deity to grant the praying person's request.

And so again, a very transactional kind of mindset, even as they're approaching the deity in this way as well. So here, Jessica McMillan compared the Sumerian prayer of lamentation to Ishtar with the biblical genre of laments and noted the following similarities and differences. So you kind of look at some specific examples here.

This one here, they have some similarities here and specifics is the poem had very similar elements to biblical lament. So we have some of those elements like, you know, invocation, praise to the deity, complaint, petition. So you have some of the elements that are common there.

There's also usage of common similar phrasing, how long, some shared stylistic similarities, poetic devices, and allusions. So you kind of have similar themes too. So you do see some of that in those kinds of prayers in this way.

The difference here is that it contained extensive praise at the beginning of the prayer. So this is not found in biblical lament. So again, just like the Egyptian prayers that have a lot of praise at the beginning, you're finding that here as well.

And then in the Bible, when you find, you know, biblical laments, especially, you know, individual ones, you just see that the psalmist just comes to God and just says, Oh God, you know, or my rock. There's no such thing as coming, praising, and buttering up God. It's just kind of a direct coming into God and addressing him in this way.

So, you're not going to find this in biblical laments, or this kind of extensive prayer that's found in the beginning. And so here, while Mesopotamian laments typically could begin with praise, biblical laments typically end with praise. And then we saw that too.

So, they kind of, you know, bring that in this way as well. And so here, another thing here is that the Sumerian prayers, a lot of times, begin with an introduction of the praying person. So, the person is introducing themselves to the gods.

So, you have this example, I am, you know, so-and-so of so-and-so, whose God is Marduk. And so, whose goddess is this? So, this formal introduction says who they are, which God they're associated with, and why they're here in that sense. This self-introduction could be adapted for various people, for different reasons, situations, and they're naming it.

And so we don't find that in the biblical text here. You don't have someone coming in and saying, I'm here and I'm represented by this God or, you know, anything like that. It's just different.

And so this, again, this mirror coming before the presence of a ruler is kind of how we could probably best see it or somebody of higher authority who's seated in the courts. And this reflects this kind of distance between this human person and the gods. And so there's a distance there reflected in this kind of need for an introduction that you're not going to find in the biblical Psalms, which speaks of Yahweh as a refuge and as a shield.

So it's very different in kind of how we think about how the Psalms portray this kind of communication before God as well. So John Walton observes that, like Egyptian and Canaanite prayers, Babylonian prayers also don't praise their gods for specific individual acts of deity done on behalf of the individual. So again, it's more of praising who they are.

It's not specific acts of thanksgiving as we find in, you know, prayers of lament and thanking God for hearing or dealing with specific situations. These are not specific in nature. And so, then here Klaus Westermann detects that in Babylonian, in Babylon, the Psalms primarily praise the one who exists, the God who exists in his world of gods.

In Israel, they primarily praise the God who acts marvelously by intervening in the history of his people and the history of the individual and members of his people. So, the gods praised in Babylon have their history among the gods. In Israel's praise from beginning to end, the basic theme is the history of God with his people.

So again, a very personal nature that you find in the biblical laments, biblical examples as opposed to, you know, the gods dealing and existing in the world of gods and kind of praising them for that rather than the God actually interacting with us as human beings in this way. And so there's a real difference in that as well. And so here, another important aspect is that, you know, the penitential prayers are kind of prayers of repentance as they try to identify sin and confess sin to appease angry deities.

Though the petitioner comes in penitent seeking reconciliation or release of sin and its consequence from the deity, who is angered because of some action by the praying one that is not specified in the prayer. So here they are coming knowing that, you know, they've done something wrong and they're trying to appease. It's about appeasement of the gods.

You know, what did we do wrong? How can we kind of rectify that? And a lot of times this was done through incantations, which were also very popular, or ritual actions, such as specific directions. They actually found texts that say, you know, do this and do that. So it's more of an orderly kind of example of what they need to do.

So they're accompanied by directions, which include the use of amulets, putting of blood on houses, burning items, dispelling evil, causing, you know, then all these things that are causing the suffering. So they're trying to alleviate the suffering. And so there are kinds of steps that they need to take.

And so biblical psalms are very different. They're not incantations. They don't have explicit directions.

They're not accompanied by, you know, kind of ritual actions to alleviate pain. You're not going to find that. You know, we're not going to wear an amulet so that our pain will go away or anything like that.

So you're not going to find anything that's similar in that sense as well. Like Egypt, the Mesopotamian prayers also took a stance of ignorance in regard to sin. So the reason is different, though.

So, you know, as we talked about, with the Egyptian mindset, with, you know, understanding of Ma'at and justice here, so instead of fearing judgment or contributing to chaos, Mesopotamian prayers kind of pleaded ignorance because they didn't really know what they had done to offend the different gods. There are so many gods.

They're not sure, you know, who they really offended here. So it's sort of more of an ignorance of what could be offensive to one god may not be offensive to another god. And so they're not really kind of knowing exactly what happened or what they did to bring about the kind of calamity that they're experiencing in this way.

And so, here, perhaps the claim of ignorance is not present in the Bible because Israel's view is not a polytheistic worldview. And so when you have so many gods, it's hard to keep track of, you know, sins that could have angered the different gods in that way as well. And so another difference here is there's the role of intermediaries.

And so here in these Mesopotamian prayers, you actually have people who have intermediaries that are going to stand in your place to kind of argue your case in this way. And so, it stems from this polytheistic worldview that one god could actually intercede for the person praying to the other gods. So people would have their own personal gods or local gods who can actually come and intercede to the more, you know, someone up higher on the echelon or hierarchy and to intercede for them in this way.

And so, they come on behalf of the praying person as a god in this way. And so having intermediaries in this way. And so here, one common feature here is the intercession of one deity before another deity on behalf of the petitioner.

So not infrequently, a suffering person will pray to his own personal god to intervene in his or her behalf before the high gods or even vice versa. So, you actually have that kind of meeting. They can't come directly to the high god.

They actually need to come through their personal god. And so here, this hierarchy existed and individuals didn't necessarily have a personal relationship with, you know, the ultimate high god in this sense. And so here, it denied total sovereignty to any individual god.

But it's interesting because even so, the higher-level gods were often praised as if they were totally sovereign. So that's kind of interesting in how they're addressed even in these kinds of texts as well. And so here, those are some of the similarities and differences that we find here.

And so this one here is in Mesopotamia, there's also a different genre called Sumerian city laments. And so, a lot of the prayers that I just discussed were considered more individual prayers, you know, supplication to the deity. And this category actually is a separate type of genre that's more corporate in some ways, or a kind of city lament is kind of how we see it.

So, these prayers mourned the fall of cities and reflected on the significance of these events that had happened. So, what brought about the fall, you know, the rebuilding of the city and things like that. So even though they're different from the communal lament genre in the Psalms, they can inform our understanding on the book of Lamentations.

So, as I referred to previously, the book of Lamentations is really kind of mourning the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. And so, you have here some predecessors in terms of Sumerian city laments that, you know, is that something that actually informed the book of Lamentations? You know, can we see that? So scholars have found the five Sumerian city laments in Mesopotamia. So these are the five that kind of lament over the destruction of Ur, these are the five that are probably most famous when we think about the genre of Sumerian city laments and how they're kind of discussed.

And so here these laments were written in response to the destruction of different cities in Sumer. So you can find here the content and the form of these varied, but they also shared themes. So, again, like we see in any kind of genre, they have some kind of shared themes in this way.

So all of them spoke of the destruction of the city and the temple by one or more of the following. So you actually have a destructive kind of event that happened, whether it be like military attacks or plague or drought or famine, and also spoke about the loss of inhabitants, the decision of the god to destroy the city, the abandonment of the city's protector god. So here the god is actually leaving the city, as well as the restoration of the city and the temple, and the return of the protector god.

So you have this whole process that's kind of even alluded to or talked about here in these. And so some scholars suggest that these city laments were recited or used when they rebuilt the cities. So after the destruction and they were rebuilt and their temple was restored, they would actually recite these at these times in this way.

Similarly, there was a later form. So kind of the development of these kind of Sumerian city laments, they actually had different categories called Balegs and Urshimas. And these were kind of derivative from these original city laments.

But these actually kind of had a little bit more vagueness to them. They became more general in nature. So kind of them, they could probably be used to adapt more easily in this way.

And so these were used when a sanctuary was to be raised and restored, and the restoration and remodeling of the temple was a major pastime in ancient Near East rulers. But they're also used during the Akitu kind of festivals in this way. And so here you can see that these were more around the same time, but they're also kind of more general in nature.

And so their predecessors are more kind of were more specific in this. This helps them to adapt it to different situations a little better as well. So, what you find here is that while scholars differ in opinion, you know, many believe that the Book of Lamentations do reflect some of the things that you find even in these Sumerian city laments.

And so here, what I want to point out, too, in general, as we're thinking about comparison to, you know, Israel's ancient Near East neighbors and the different kind of forms and texts and prayers and things that we find here is, you know, thinking about here, even the Book of Lamentations and the Sumerian city laments. So it's to show that literature doesn't arise in a vacuum. So even as we're looking at the biblical laments and thinking about that, it's not arising from a vacuum.

They have a context of neighbors. They have a context in which these forms are kind of coming out here. And so previously, you know, contextual influence and previous prototypes can be used to shape later works.

And so here we can see some similarities and biblical kinds of examples. We can also see a lot of differences in there as well. And so these influences don't have to mirror the theological or philosophical understanding of the previous works, even though there are similarities that exist, and the differences can be instructive and illuminating.

And so I think just as you can see this, even for the Book of Lamentations and then all of the ones that we've just examined, we can also see that it can be instructive for us as we think about biblical laments and how it's different, how can we learn? And that's kind of where, you know, this last portion is talking about, you know, after walking through in a very brief way some of the examples here, how can we learn from the similarities and differences? So when we're looking at the prayers of Israel's neighbors, how does this help us when we desire to recover biblical lament when we think about biblical what's you know, what is different about biblical lament and how does the lament genre in the Old Testament reflect the culture of its time and how do they differ as well? And so what do we find in that? How can that be instructive, and how can we refer and learn from these differences in what we find in these examples as well? And so I first like to talk a little bit now in summarizing, you know, looking at all those different types here, you know, what are some similarities? What are some differences? What can we actually learn from these, and what can arise from this? And so, here is one thing that is similar: just like their neighbors offered their prayers to the gods during difficult times, and they had, you know, similar elements, vocabularies, and themes, you can find that Israel is doing the same as well. So, I think that speaks to the universal nature of suffering, the universal nature of the kind of situations in our lives that we need to seek help and supplication. And so here we can find that this kind of coming to the gods during difficult times.

Their world view went beyond the physical world. And so here, you know, it wasn't just the material world that existed for them. They recognized that there was something beyond the physical world and thus kind of alluding and kind of coming before the gods.

They believe that the gods were the one who upheld justice and brought vindication, healing and relief. And so kind of acknowledging here that it comes, you know, outside of themselves, kind of even from the spiritual realm and from gods who upheld the justice and kind of had, you know, that kind of power in that sense. They believed in the existence of divine beings and their ability to aid the praying person.

And so here there is engagement here with the divine world and, you know, the physical world and the person praying as well. And so it wasn't just a deity that's far removed, but they can actually engage here. And they also saw divine beings as greater in ability than humans.

Therefore, it's not surprising that the gods were praised extensively for their character and general deeds displayed in creation and sustaining the world. And so here recognizing that, you know, human beings are limited in our power and that we do need to kind of kind of come to someone higher of greater authority in that sense. And so having those kind of similarities and approaching here the deity and gods in that sense as well.

So then, when we think about differences here, you know, there are some foundational theological differences, which can be summed up in the following two main categories. So kind of thinking about there are two main categories that I would kind of categorize these differences. And the first one here would be how they viewed the relationship between human beings and the divine.

So, here, more specifically, how were the relationships viewed between the human beings and the divine? Although they knew that, you know, humans were kind of limited in their power, and the deities were more powerful. You know, what characterized the way that they saw the relationship and how they interacted? So the first one here is, you know, definitely this polytheistic versus a monotheistic kind of worldview and how they see it. And so, here this polytheistic worldview made it difficult for that personal interaction with all the gods.

So, prayers did not reflect an intimate relationship. So this is something that's very obvious here, because when you have so many gods, it's hard to, you know, be intimate with all of them in that way. And so kind of you to see that it wasn't necessarily an intimate relationship in how it's reflected and how, when they approach that, which is very different from the Bible.

And in that kind of sense, it also shaped their view of sin. And so, whether it was the ignorance of sin, more specifically with the Egyptian kind of understanding that they didn't want to, you know, kind of participate and contribute to chaos, or that it was difficult to keep track of what they'd done to provoke or displease different gods. So here it shaped how they viewed sin and what they did wrong, or kind of how they're approaching their gods in that way, and as they're entreating them.

So this required the need for intercession for gods from gods or for the praying person. So to help them secure a favor, because there was this hierarchy that existed. So here they couldn't do it alone.

They had to have other gods to come and assist them, their personal gods, people to come as intermediaries in this one. It's not enough to be in harmony with one's personal god. They needed to help from the gods to ensure the overall well-being.

So they needed to, you know, spread their nets wide, make sure that everything was going to be OK. And so here their understanding contributed the sense of distance when approaching the divine. So, they needed to introduce themselves and come with gifts or offerings.

And so here it could be very formal. They actually have to introduce themselves to the high gods. They actually had to see it more transactional, bring kind of about, you know, sacrifices and offerings here or gifts in order for their request to be heard.

They also began their interactions with very extensive praise to ensure a positive response. So they had to put their best foot forward for the gods to be willing to hear and answer their request. Another difference is that, you know, there's a more distant relationship with the divine in terms of you don't have as many thanksgiving prayers, any personal answers that they are talking about here and declaring, you know, attributing to what the god has done for the individual.

It's more of a praise in a general nature than a recognition of what the gods have done for the individual in a sense. And then here their prayers emphasize the mythical elements of their gods. So, kind of, again, showing a greater distance between the gods and the human world.

And so here a greater distance in that sense as well. So, here, the other thing to think about is how they view the relationship between gods and humans. So, this is where the Old Testament doesn't present this polytheistic worldview.

And so, Yahweh is the only God. So he's the creator and the sustainer of the world. So, they don't, the Psalms don't show a God who's removed.

And so here we show that God is actually, you know, very intimate. So, you have even in Psalm 2710, the psalmist declares with confidence that even if his own parents abandoned him, he knows that the Lord would still care for him. I mean, the intimacy is so different, so stark from the kind of prayers that we see modeled in the other ones here.

And so there's no formal introduction needed when approaching Yahweh. He knew the psalmist intimately even before he was born, it says in Psalm 139. And so here there's a genuine sense of intimacy that the psalmist is aware of, and knows this kind of relationship that he has with Yahweh.

Israel also had this special covenant relationship. And so he can actually bring, without any pretense here, he can just kind of come in and bring in his requests. And so he doesn't have to praise God extensively.

So, you don't see any extensive praise that are happening in these prayers of lament before. It's just usually kind of this invocation or calling out to God in a direct address to God and then going into the request and the lamentation in that way as well. So here can lead straight into the lament and the request as well.

They can come in without having to secure the favor of a third party. You don't have an intermediary in the sense of these prayers. You know, one God praying on behalf of that.

You don't have that kind of example of that with these prayers of lament. They had they didn't have to come without sin or coming without, you know, putting their best behavior. So instead, the psalmist often expressed their pain and distress and then freely admitted guilt as well as innocence.

And so, they didn't have to distance themselves from their predecessors to absolve guilt. But they identified with their sins. They were honest in their intentions, even as they came before that.

And so what I think it's even amazing here is, you know, as New Testament believers, we can experience even greater communion as God's people because the Holy Spirit actually is living inside of us, as it says in 2 Corinthians. So this should encourage us to come before God in confidence. So even as we think about prayers of lament and even lamenting for ourselves here, you know, a crisis done on the cross has given us access to the throne of grace.

And so here, even as we see these prayers of lament as ways for us to pray, we can actually have greater confidence and understanding that this is foundational for us. And we're thinking about recovering biblical lament, that it's rooted in the genre of lament found in scripture, that we actually, as New Testament believers, can come in with confidence and recognizing this intimacy that we can have with God as well. And so, the Old Testament constantly speaks of God hearing the cries of his people and delivering them.

We find that in Exodus. And so here, the genre of declarative praise or thanksgiving was usually associated with individual laments. So here, this is something very different.

So actually, you have, you know, with Herman Gunkel, kind of identifying four different types of genre in the Psalms. One of them is Thanksgiving Psalms, and they're usually associated with laments and so individual laments. And so here is kind of God's response to and his answers to individual prayers.

And so declarative praise is results from God's action and intervention, the source of the declarative praise. And so, this is kind of interesting here. Again, the fact that declarative praise exists in the Bible is a testimony that prayers of lament do not go unheard.

And I think that's important for us. You know, we're not praying to God that we hope would hear. We're praying to Yahweh, our heavenly father.

And he's the only one who is able to answer. And he does answer. And so we find that even in the Psalms, he does answer.

And so as he answered the psalmist, he can answer us as well. And that we're not just casting our prayers into this abyss of the spiritual realm or into the universe without any kind of assurance of being heard. We actually find scriptural examples here in this way.

And so we're not alone in our suffering. And that even for us as New Testament believers, Jesus intercedes for us and reminds us that, you know, he who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us. I'll show how we can also, along with him, graciously give us all things so we can have confidence even as we're praying the laments as well.

So the second way that in terms of differences here is theologically is, you know, how the prayers function. And so here, as you've read, many of the prayers were transactional. So the Hittites were coming before God to give reasons and arguments for why God should be persuaded to forgive or eliminate sin and suffering.

Their emphasis was not on asking mercy or forgiveness. And so that's very different in that sense. The reason we're also often related to our company by sacrifices and offerings brought and pledged by the petitioner.

And then you also see in these Sumerian Babylonian prayers, they're considered incantations, so kind of rituals and gifts and things that they needed to do. And so they were performing these to ensure a positive outcome. So answers were dependent on making sure that they perform these rituals correctly, bringing the right gifts, and doing the right things here.

And then also these rituals often included incantations that reinforced the transactional mindset. So, it's a very transactional mindset, as you think about. So the step-by-step process was probably easier and safer when approaching the divine than coming in with total surrender and vulnerability.

So that's really different here. When you think about that, that kind of mindset here and how the prayers function, you know, like when we come, it's not like we've got to do this and this and this and make sure that we do it right in order for us to get the right result. It's actually what you find in the book of Psalms here.

And then the laments are just the Psalms pouring out their hearts, coming in vulnerability. It's a very different from coming in with a transactional mindset and kind of how you could see things in this way. And so here, while there are similar terminology in the Psalms, the Old Testament is different here where it says, you know, Yahweh regarded righteousness and justice as more important than sacrifices.

And this is where you find that doing what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than a sacrifice. And so here, in other words, Yahweh is not persuaded to act by mere sacrifices or offerings. And so the psalmist does offer vows of praise, as we can see, but they don't function as incantations.

It's not the same thing. So, praise is not a substitute for sacrifice. The vow is not given to ensure a positive outcome.

Instead, it was part of a transition from lament and petition to praise. And so, this is important because when we think about biblical lament and recovering biblical lament, it reinforces that biblical lament is a process. So, it's not just this way in which you're coming in with a transaction.

It's not a formula. It's not an incantation. When we lament before God, we're actually waiting on him.

We're coming before God in this way. So, as we pour our pain and our disappointments, pain and shame and suffering, we are not engaging in a transactional ritual. We're coming before Yahweh, who is our heavenly father.

We're sharing our deepest thoughts, desires, and hopes. It's in this process that the psalmist often finds a new outlook and a new expectation that leads to greater hope. Just as Job and Habakkuk were given a new perspective through their encounter with God, many of the psalms of lament also exhibit this change.

And so, the biblical lament prayers are not incantations, and they're not just bargaining or manipulating God into action. Instead, they're engaging God in full surrender and vulnerability. And so, I think that's something that we really need to kind of take to heart when we think about recovering biblical lament, and we think about prayer and how we're engaging God.

And so, these are I just like to close our time here with some reflection questions, you know. So, after a brief discussion about the prayers of Israel's neighbors, how do they help us to see the unique nature of biblical lament, you know, kind of arising from that context? What's so unique about what we find in the Bible? And I think there are a lot of things that we could be grateful for and thankful for. And so, what are some general theological differences between the Old Testament's view of God versus that of its neighbors? And how do these differences affect their prayers? And so here thinking about how they approach God, how they prayed in this way, and what were some specific differences, and which ones stood out to you the most? And how do these differences help you to appreciate biblical lament and what we find in scripture? So, thank you.

This is Dr. May Young in her teaching on Comparing Laments from Israel's Ancient Near Eastern Neighbors, Session 2.