

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

1) Abstract, 2) Briefing Document, 3) Study Guide, 4) FAQs

## 1) Abstract

Dr. May Young's lecture, "Comparing Laments from Israel's Ancient Near Eastern Neighbors, Session 2," **examines the similarities and differences between Israelite laments, particularly those found in the Psalms, and the prayers of surrounding cultures like Egypt, Canaan (Ugaritic and Hittite), and Mesopotamia (Sumerian and Babylonian).** The discussion **highlights how these ancient Near Eastern prayers often focused on extensive praise, transactional bargaining with multiple deities, and a reluctance to admit sin, often rooted in polytheistic worldviews and a desire to appease or persuade gods.** In contrast, **biblical laments, while sharing some stylistic elements and themes, are characterized by a direct, intimate, and often vulnerable approach to a single, sovereign God, Yahweh, emphasizing relational trust over ritualistic appeasement or transactional exchanges.** Young concludes that **understanding these distinctions illuminates the unique theological depth and relational nature of biblical lament within its historical and cultural context.**

## 2) Briefing Document: Briefing Document: Comparing Laments from Israel's Ancient Near Eastern Neighbors

**Source:** Excerpts from "Young\_Lament\_Session02\_English.pdf" by Dr. May Young

### I. Introduction and Scope

Dr. May Young's session focuses on comparing laments found in the biblical tradition, particularly in the Book of Psalms, with those from Israel's Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) neighbors: Egypt, Canaan (Ugaritic and Hittite), and Mesopotamia (Sumerian and Babylonian). The primary goal is to identify similarities and differences in these forms of

supplication to deities, ultimately highlighting what is distinctive and instructive about biblical laments. The discussion specifically *excludes* funeral laments (dirges) and concentrates on supplications for divine help in difficult times.

## II. Key Themes and Comparisons by Culture

### A. Egyptian Laments

- **Scarcity and Nature:** Hymns and prayers are less common in the Old and Middle Kingdoms but more so in the New Kingdom. However, New Kingdom prayers are "mostly hymns," characterized by "excessive or descriptive praise." (p. 2)
- **Praise vs. Petition:** Egyptian prayers predominantly feature general praise for the deity's nature rather than declarative praise or thanksgiving for specific individual acts on behalf of the worshiper. While petitions appear more in the 19th Dynasty, they are still distinctly different from biblical laments.
- **Structure of Petitions:** Egyptian prayers "usually began with extensive praise and blessing" (p. 3). Direct requests (petitions) typically came at the end, serving to explain "why all the preceding praise was necessary." (p. 3) This is likened to children "buttering up" a parent before making a request. (p. 3)
- **Admission of Sin:** "Admission of sin and seeking mercy from the gods is not common." (p. 3) Faults are described as results of "ignorance rather than sin." (p. 3) The general attitude was to "deny having committed sin altogether." (p. 3)
- **Worldview (Ma'at):** This denial of sin stems from the Egyptian principle of *ma'at* (justice, cosmic order, truth, balance). Admitting guilt would "upset the balance of their worldview" and "admit contribution to chaos," potentially having "detrimental consequences, especially in the afterlife." (p. 4)
- **Similarity with Israel:** Both Egyptian and Israelite cultures recognized their primary deity (Amun-Re for Egyptians, Yahweh for Israelites) as the "god who guarantees ma'at" or justice. Therefore, people could approach the deity for justice, and enemies were seen as opposing the deity. (p. 4)

### B. Canaanite Laments (Ugaritic and Hittite)

#### 1. Ugaritic Examples

- **Limited Comparability:** Most Ugaritic texts are administrative or narrative poems, not directly comparable to biblical Lament Psalms.
- **Shared Poetic Style:** Significant similarity in the use of "parallelism," a poetic device prevalent in Hebrew poetry. (p. 5)
- **Similar Themes and Vocabulary:** Shared themes include "divine kingship, victory over the enemies, divine counsel, and the underworld," and some shared vocabulary. (p. 5)
- **Differences: Devotion to the Dead:** A prevalent theme in Ugaritic texts, but "not necessarily found in the biblical texts," where "The Psalms represent the Israelite deity as the god of the living and the living god." (p. 5)
- **Mythical Imagery:** Ugaritic texts emphasize mythical imagery more significantly, particularly concerning the god Baal. (p. 5)
- **Genre:** While they contain elements like descriptive praise, blessing, laments, and complaints, they are not categorized in the same way as biblical texts and are not direct "one-to-one comparison[s]." (p. 6)
- **Polytheistic Worldview:** A fundamental difference is the "belief in a polytheistic worldview as opposed to the monotheistic worldview of scripture." (p. 6)

## 2. Hittite Examples

- **Limited Parallels:** Few direct parallels to Old Testament Lament Psalms. Earlier prayers were general, while later royal prayers were more specific to kings/royal family seeking help. (p. 6)
- **Polytheistic Pantheon:** Hittites worshipped a vast pantheon; for instance, one prayer by Muwatalli II invoked "140 deities of 83 different localities." (p. 7) This contrasts sharply with Israel's focus on Yahweh alone.
- **Transactional Worldview:** A notable difference is the "transactional worldview as they relate to their gods." (p. 7) This involves bargaining, where prayers promise rewards (e.g., bread and libations) in exchange for divine intervention.
- **Prayers as "Arguments":** The Hittite term for prayer is related to the English word "argument," suggesting prayers were "quite literally arguments or strategies to persuade the gods." (p. 7)

- **Contrast with Israel (Micah 6:8):** This transactional mindset is "very different" from the biblical view, where Yahweh desires "a relationship with his people and for them to walk in righteousness, humility, and justice" over mere sacrifices. (p. 7-8)
- **Comparison to Psalm 88 and 89 (Mursili II's Prayer): Similarities:** Both the Hittite prayer and Psalms 88/89 "remain in darkness and lament to their very end," waiting for divine intervention. Both have a "strong royal character" and share themes of "requesting help from the deity and reflecting on the deity's past favorable treatments." (p. 8)
- **Differences: Individual vs. Corporate:** Psalm 88 is individual, while the Hittite king speaks "on behalf of the nation and even functions like a chief priest." (p. 8)
- **Admission of Guilt:** Hittite prayers, like Mursili's, "try to distance the present generation from the previous one in order to absolve guilt," stating the king "did not do any evil." (p. 8-9) This contrasts with Psalm 89, which "emphasizes the connection to past generations" and does not distance from forefathers' sins. (p. 9)
- **Reason for Wrath:** Unlike the Hittite prayer, Psalms 88 and 89 "do not identify the reason for the divine wrath," focusing instead on "imploping Yahweh to bring relief" rather than retribution. (p. 9)

### C. Mesopotamian Laments (Sumerian and Babylonian)

- **Largest Collection:** This region offers "the largest collection of prayers that could be compared to a kind of biblical laments." (p. 9)
- **Votive Objects and Proxies:** Early prayers were inscribed on votive objects (bowls, weapons, statues) and placed in temples to act as "a proxy" for the praying person, ensuring constant presence before the deity. Later, as objects became costly, prayers were written as letters and left in temples. (p. 9)
- **Rituals and Gifts:** Prayers were often "accompanied by rituals," including "sacrifices or gifts to appease the gods so that the requests would be granted." (p. 10) This again reflects a "very transactional kind of mindset." (p. 10)

- **Similarities to Biblical Laments:** Some Sumerian laments share elements like "invocation, praise to the deity, complaint, petition," common phrasing ("how long"), stylistic similarities, poetic devices, and allusions. (p. 10)
- **Differences:Praise Placement:** Mesopotamian laments "contained extensive praise at the beginning of the prayer," a feature "not found in biblical lament." (p. 10) Biblical laments typically *end* with praise. (p. 10)
- **Self-Introduction:** Sumerian prayers "begin with an introduction of the praying person" (e.g., "I am, you know, so-and-so of so-and-so, whose God is Marduk."). (p. 10) This formal introduction, reflecting distance between human and god, is "not found in the biblical text." (p. 11)
- **General vs. Specific Praise:** Like Egyptian and Canaanite prayers, Babylonian prayers "don't praise their gods for specific individual acts of deity done on behalf of the individual." (p. 11) They praise the deity "who exists in his world of gods," whereas Israel praises "the God who acts marvelously by intervening in the history of his people and the history of the individual." (p. 11)
- **Penitential Prayers and Ignorance of Sin:** Penitential prayers seek to appease "angry deities" for unspecified actions. This often involved "incantations" and "ritual actions" (amulets, blood, burning items) with "explicit directions." (p. 12) Biblical psalms are "very different," not being incantations or accompanied by such ritual actions. (p. 12) Mesopotamians "pleaded ignorance" regarding sin because with "so many gods," it was hard to know "who they really offended." (p. 12) This contrasts with Israel's monotheistic worldview where sin against Yahweh is clear.
- **Role of Intermediaries:** Mesopotamian prayers frequently feature "intermediaries," where a "personal god" or "local god" intercedes with a "higher-level god" on behalf of the petitioner. (p. 12-13) This "hierarchy existed and individuals didn't necessarily have a personal relationship with... the ultimate high god." (p. 13) This is absent in biblical laments.
- **Sumerian City Laments:** A distinct genre mourning the "fall of cities" and reflecting on their destruction and rebuilding. (p. 13) These share themes of destruction (military, plague, drought), loss of inhabitants, divine decision to destroy, abandonment by protector god, and restoration. Scholars suggest these

informed the biblical Book of Lamentations, demonstrating that "literature doesn't arise in a vacuum." (p. 14-15)

### III. General Similarities and Differences

#### A. Similarities

- **Universal Nature of Suffering:** Like their neighbors, Israelites offered prayers to gods during "difficult times," using "similar elements, vocabularies, and themes." (p. 15) This points to the universal human experience of suffering and seeking divine help.
- **Belief in a Divine Realm:** All cultures recognized a world "beyond the physical world" and believed in "divine beings" capable of upholding justice, bringing vindication, healing, and aid. (p. 15-16)
- **Divine Superiority:** Acknowledged that divine beings were "greater in ability than humans," leading to extensive praise for their character and general deeds in creation and sustaining the world. (p. 16)

#### B. Foundational Theological Differences

These differences primarily stem from two main categories:

##### 1. View of the Relationship Between Humans and the Divine

- **Polytheism vs. Monotheism: Polytheistic (ANE):** Made "personal interaction with all the gods" difficult, resulting in prayers that "did not reflect an intimate relationship." (p. 16) This also shaped their view of sin (ignorance, difficulty tracking offenses) and necessitated "intercession for gods from gods or for the praying person" due to a divine hierarchy. (p. 16) Approaches were formal, requiring "introductions," "gifts or offerings," and "extensive praise to ensure a positive response" (buttering up). (p. 17) Prayers emphasized "mythical elements," showing "greater distance between the gods and the human world." (p. 17)
- **Monotheistic (Israelite):** Yahweh is the "only God," "creator and the sustainer." (p. 17) The Psalms portray a God who is *not* removed but "very intimate" (e.g., Psalm 27:10, 139). "No formal introduction needed when approaching Yahweh." (p. 17) Due to a "special covenant relationship," Israelites could "bring [requests] without any pretense" and "without having to secure the favor of a third party."

(p. 18) They could "freely admitted guilt as well as innocence," not needing to distance themselves from predecessors. (p. 18) The existence of "declarative praise" in the Bible testifies that "prayers of lament do not go unheard." (p. 19)

## 2. How Prayers Functioned

- **Transactional (ANE):** Many prayers were "transactional," involving "arguments or strategies to persuade the gods" through "sacrifices and offerings brought and pledged by the petitioner." (p. 19) These were often "incantations" or "rituals" with "explicit directions" (amulets, burning items) performed "to ensure a positive outcome." (p. 19) This "step-by-step process was probably easier and safer when approaching the divine than coming in with total surrender and vulnerability." (p. 19)
- **Relational (Israelite):** Biblical laments are "not incantations," "bargaining or manipulating God into action." (p. 20) Instead, they are the psalmist "pouring out their hearts, coming in vulnerability." (p. 20) Yahweh "regarded righteousness and justice as more important than sacrifices." (p. 20) Vows of praise are not incantations but "part of a transition from lament and petition to praise," indicating that "biblical lament is a process." (p. 20) This process, marked by "full surrender and vulnerability," often leads to a "new outlook and a new expectation that leads to greater hope." (p. 20)

## IV. Conclusion: Uniqueness and Instruction of Biblical Lament

The comparison reveals the unique nature of biblical lament, rooted in Israel's monotheistic worldview and intimate covenant relationship with Yahweh. Unlike the transactional, distant, or formulaic prayers of ANE neighbors, biblical laments are characterized by:

- **Direct, Intimate Access:** No need for formal introductions, intermediaries, or extensive preliminary praise.
- **Honest Confession:** Freedom to admit sin or declare innocence without fear of upsetting cosmic balance or offending multiple gods.
- **Relational Vulnerability:** A pouring out of the heart in "full surrender and vulnerability," not a bargaining process.

- **Assurance of Being Heard:** The presence of declarative praise demonstrates God's responsiveness and intervention, reinforcing that prayers are not cast into an "abyss." (p. 19)
- **Process, Not Formula:** Biblical lament is a journey from pain and petition to hope and praise, often leading to a renewed perspective.

For New Testament believers, this understanding is further enriched by the Holy Spirit's indwelling and Christ's atonement, offering "greater communion" and "access to the throne of grace" with confidence. (p. 18-19)

### 3) Study Guide: Understanding Laments in the Ancient Near East: A Comparative Study

#### Study Guide

This study guide is designed to help you review and deepen your understanding of Dr. May Young's lecture, "Comparing Laments from Israel's Ancient Near Eastern Neighbors, Session 2."

#### I. Introduction to Lament Comparison

- **Purpose of the Lecture:** To compare and contrast laments in Ancient Israel with those of its neighbors (Egypt, Canaanite/Ugaritic, Hittite, Mesopotamian) to identify similarities, differences, and instructive lessons for understanding biblical laments.
- **Focus of Lament:** The lecture primarily focuses on "supplication to the deity" rather than "dirges" (funeral laments).
- **Key Questions Explored:** Are supplication laments known in surrounding cultures?
- Do they involve prayers for help from gods?
- What can be learned from these ANE examples?
- What is unique or different about biblical laments?
- How is this instructive for us?

## II. Egyptian Laments

- **Historical Overview:** Few hymns/prayers in Old/Middle Kingdoms comparable to biblical laments.
- More comparable texts in the New Kingdom, but still distinct.
- **Characteristics of Egyptian Prayers (New Kingdom): Dominance of Hymns:** Mostly characterized by extensive descriptive praise.
- **Lack of Declarative Praise/Thanksgiving:** Generally do not contain specific individual acts of deity on behalf of the praying person (observed by John Walton). Personal thanksgiving may have existed but was not part of official temple worship.
- **Petition (19th Dynasty):** Petitions emerge but typically come *after* extensive praise, serving to explain why the preceding praise was necessary (likened to "buttering up" a parent).
- **Admission of Sin:** Not common. Faults described as a result of *ignorance* rather than sin.
- **Worldview (Ma'at):** Emphasis on *ma'at* (justice, cosmic order, truth, balance) and the retribution principle (act and consequence). Admitting guilt would upset this balance and contribute to chaos, with detrimental afterlife consequences.
- **Similarities with Israelite Understanding:** Deity (Amun-Re) guarantees *ma'at* (justice), just as Yahweh administers justice for Israel.
- People can petition the god for justice.
- Enemies of Pharaoh (representing chaos/isfet) are similar to enemies against Yahweh.

## III. Canaanite Laments (Ugaritic and Hittite)

- **Ugaritic Examples: Textual Context:** Discoveries from Ugarit (Late Bronze Age, modern Syria) mostly administrative texts or narrative poems, not comparable to Lament Psalms. Few notable prayers.
- **Similarities with Psalms:** Shared poetic style: extensive use of parallelism.

- Similar themes: divine kingship, victory over enemies, divine counsel, the underworld.
- Shared vocabulary.
- **Differences from Psalms: Devotion to the Dead:** Prevalent theme in Ugaritic texts, but biblical Psalms present Israelite deity as God of the living.
- **Mythical Imagery:** Greater emphasis on mythical imagery (e.g., Baal).
- **Genre:** Not direct parallels to biblical laments; mixtures of descriptive praise, blessing, laments, vows, complaints.
- **Polytheistic Worldview:** Belief in multiple gods, unlike Israel's monotheism.
- **Hittite Examples: Textual Context:** Hittite Empire (modern Turkey). Few parallels to Old Testament Psalms of Lament.
- **Evolution of Prayers:** Old Kingdom (17th c. BC): More general in nature, not linked to specific individuals.
- New Empire: Many royal prayers, specifically identified with kings/royal family, seeking help against enemies, plagues, illnesses.
- **Polytheistic Worldview:** Worshipped a pantheon of gods (e.g., Muwatali II invoked 140 deities).
- **Notable Differences: Transactional Worldview:** Prayers are like bargaining or arguments to persuade gods. Offerings promised in exchange for divine action (e.g., bread/libations to Sun Goddess Arena to eliminate plague). Hittite term for prayer related to "argument."
- **Absolving Guilt:** Attempt to distance present generation from past one to absolve guilt; King Mursili attributes suffering to father's broken vow, denying his own evil. This is contrary to Psalm 89, which emphasizes connection to past generations and does not absolve guilt.
- **Purpose of Lament:** Hittite prayers try to identify the reason for divine wrath (retribution); biblical laments (Psalm 88, 89) implore Yahweh to bring relief, not focusing on retribution.

- **Similarities (with Psalms 88 & 89):** Both remain in darkness and lament to the end, waiting for divine intervention.
- Strong royal character (in Psalm 89 and Hittite royal prayers).
- Shared themes of requesting help and reflecting on past favorable treatments.

#### IV. Mesopotamian Laments (Sumerian and Babylonian)

- **Textual Context:** Largest collection of comparable prayers.
- **Evolution of Prayers:** Earlier periods: Inscribed on votive objects (bowls, weapons, statues) placed in temples as proxies for constant presence before deity.
- Later: Written as letters left in temples due to cost.
- **Accompaniment:** Many prayers accompanied by rituals (sacrifices, gifts) to motivate deities (transactional mindset).
- **Similarities with Biblical Laments:** Contain elements like invocation, praise, complaint, petition.
- Usage of similar phrasing ("how long"), stylistic similarities, poetic devices, allusions, themes.
- **Differences from Biblical Laments:** **Extensive Praise at Beginning:** Common in Mesopotamian laments, but not in biblical laments (which typically *end* with praise, if at all). Biblical laments are direct.
- **Introduction of Praying Person:** Formal self-introduction stating name, associated god/goddess, and reason for presence (reflects distance between human and gods, unlike biblical Psalms where Yahweh is a refuge).
- **General vs. Specific Praise:** Do not praise gods for specific individual acts done on behalf of the individual, but rather for who they are (existence in their world of gods). Israel praises God for intervening in history (personal and national).
- **Penitential Prayers:** Aim to identify and confess sin to appease angry deities. However, the reason for anger is often unspecified.
- **Incantations/Ritual Actions:** Accompanied by specific directions, use of amulets, blood, burning items to dispel evil and alleviate suffering. Biblical Psalms are not incantations or ritual actions.

- **Ignorance of Sin:** Pleaded ignorance due to the vast number of gods, making it difficult to know which god was offended (unlike Israel's monotheistic view).
- **Intermediaries:** Need for personal gods or local gods to intercede before higher-level deities, reflecting a hierarchy and denying total sovereignty to any individual god. No direct access to "ultimate high god." Biblical Psalms allow direct access to Yahweh.
- **Sumerian City Laments:Genre:** Separate from individual prayers; mourned fall/destruction/rebuilding of cities (e.g., Ur).
- **Shared Themes:** Destruction by military, plague, drought, famine; loss of inhabitants; god's decision to destroy/abandon; restoration of city/temple and return of protector god.
- **Function:** Recited during city rebuilding and temple restoration, and later became more general for adaptable use (Balegs and Urshimas).
- **Connection to Lamentations:** Scholars suggest they informed the Book of Lamentations, demonstrating that literature does not arise in a vacuum but is shaped by contextual influences.

## V. Lessons Learned: Similarities and Differences Summarized

- **Universal Similarities:** People offered prayers to gods during difficult times.
- Similar elements, vocabularies, and themes in prayers (reflecting universal nature of suffering and need for help).
- Worldview extended beyond the physical; recognized a spiritual realm.
- Believed gods upheld justice, brought vindication, healing, relief.
- Believed in divine beings and their ability to aid the praying person; not distant deities.
- Recognized divine beings as greater in ability than humans, hence extensive praise for character and general deeds (creation, sustaining world).
- **Foundational Theological Differences (Two Main Categories):View of Relationship between Human Beings and the Divine:Polytheistic vs.**

**Monotheistic Worldview:** Polytheism led to less intimate relationships with all gods.

- **View of Sin:** Shaped understanding of sin (ignorance vs. chaos; difficulty tracking offenses).
- **Need for Intercession:** Required intermediaries (gods praying for humans) due to hierarchy.
- **Distance in Approach:** Formal introductions, gifts/offerings, extensive praise *before* requests (to secure positive response). Less emphasis on personal answers/declarative praise for individual acts. Emphasis on mythical elements reinforced distance.
- **Biblical Counterpoint (Monotheism):** Yahweh is the only God, Creator, Sustainer. Not removed, but intimate (e.g., Psalm 27:10, 139). No formal introduction needed. Covenant relationship allows direct, unpretentious requests. No intermediaries needed. Psalmist freely admits guilt/innocence; no distancing from predecessors.
- **How Prayers Function: Transactional Nature:** Hittite prayers were arguments/persuasions, often with sacrifices as conditions. Mesopotamian prayers were incantations/rituals/gifts for positive outcomes (answers dependent on correct performance).
- **Process vs. Formula:** Step-by-step process seemed "safer" than total surrender and vulnerability.
- **Biblical Counterpoint:** Yahweh values righteousness/justice more than sacrifices (Micah 6:8). Vows of praise are not incantations or guarantees of outcome, but part of a transition from lament to praise. Biblical lament is a *process* of pouring out heart in full surrender and vulnerability, leading to new outlook/hope (like Job, Habakkuk). Not bargaining or manipulating God.
- **Declarative Praise:** Its existence in the Bible testifies that laments are heard. God hears and answers (Exodus, Psalms).

## VI. Conclusion

- Biblical literature, including laments, does not arise in a vacuum but is shaped by its ANE context.

- Similarities exist, but differences are instructive and illuminating.
- Biblical lament is unique: rooted in an intimate, covenantal relationship with the one, sovereign God who hears and acts, and who values righteousness and relationship over ritualistic transactions.
- New Testament believers have even greater confidence and access through the Holy Spirit and Christ's sacrifice, allowing bold, vulnerable lament.

#### Quiz: Ancient Near Eastern Laments

**Instructions:** Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What is the primary focus of Dr. Young's lecture regarding laments, and what type of lament is explicitly *not* the focus?
2. Describe the typical structure of an Egyptian prayer for petition, as observed by Atmar Akil.
3. How did the Egyptian concept of *ma'at* influence their approach to admitting sin in prayers?
4. Identify two significant similarities between Ugaritic texts and biblical Psalms.
5. What is a key difference in how Ugaritic texts and biblical Psalms address the theme of the dead?
6. Explain the "transactional worldview" evident in Hittite prayers and provide an example.
7. How do Mesopotamian prayers typically begin, and how does this contrast with biblical laments?
8. Why did Mesopotamian prayers often plead "ignorance" regarding sin, and how does this differ from the Israelite perspective?
9. Describe the role of "intermediaries" in Mesopotamian prayers.
10. What does the existence of "declarative praise" in biblical laments signify about Israelite prayer compared to ANE neighbors?

#### Quiz Answer Key

1. The primary focus of Dr. Young's lecture is on laments as "supplications to the deity," which involve asking for help from gods. "Dirges," or funeral laments mourning loss of death, are explicitly *not* the focus.
2. Egyptian prayers for petition usually began with extensive praise and blessing, with the direct requests coming later. This structure was intended to explain why the preceding praise was necessary, effectively "buttering up" the deity before presenting the petition.
3. The Egyptian concept of *ma'at* emphasized cosmic justice and balance. To admit sin would disrupt this balance and contribute to chaos, which had detrimental consequences, especially in the afterlife, leading them to deny committing sin or attribute faults to ignorance.
4. Two significant similarities are a shared poetic style, particularly the extensive use of parallelism, and similar thematic concerns such as divine kingship, victory over enemies, divine counsel, and the underworld. They also shared some vocabulary.
5. Ugaritic texts often featured devotion to the dead as a prevalent theme. In contrast, biblical Psalms characterize the Israelite deity as the "God of the living" and do not emphasize devotion to the dead in the same way.
6. The transactional worldview in Hittite prayers meant they were seen as arguments or strategies to persuade the gods, often involving bargaining. An example is promising bread and libations to a goddess if she eliminated a plague, demonstrating a quid pro quo approach.
7. Mesopotamian prayers typically began with a formal self-introduction of the praying person, stating their name and associated gods. This contrasts sharply with biblical laments, where the psalmist comes directly to God without formal introduction, reflecting an intimate relationship.
8. Mesopotamian prayers pleaded ignorance regarding sin because their polytheistic worldview made it difficult to know which specific god might have been offended by an action. This differs from Israel's monotheistic view, where there was no such confusion about offending one of many deities.
9. In Mesopotamian prayers, intermediaries were personal or local gods who would intercede on behalf of the praying person before higher-level deities. This system

arose from their polytheistic hierarchy, as individuals often lacked a direct relationship with the ultimate high gods.

10. The existence of declarative praise in biblical laments signifies that these prayers do not go unheard; they are a testimony to God's action and intervention. It reinforces the Israelite belief that Yahweh hears and answers prayers, unlike the less assured outcomes in some ANE prayer traditions.

### Essay Format Questions

1. Analyze the theological implications of the "transactional worldview" found in Hittite and Mesopotamian laments. How does this fundamentally differ from the Israelite understanding of prayer and God's interaction with humanity, as exemplified in Micah 6:8?
2. Discuss the role of "admission of sin" in Egyptian and Mesopotamian prayers compared to biblical laments. How do their respective worldviews (Ma'at, polytheism, covenant) account for these differences?
3. Evaluate the significance of "formal introductions" and the use of "intermediaries" in Mesopotamian prayers. What do these practices reveal about the perceived distance between humans and deities in the ANE, and how does this contrast with the intimacy described in biblical Psalms?
4. To what extent do Sumerian city laments provide a literary "prototype" for the biblical Book of Lamentations? Discuss both the similarities in themes and form, and how the theological differences between the two traditions might shape the ultimate message of suffering and hope.
5. Dr. Young identifies two main categories of foundational theological differences between Israel's view of God and its neighbors: the relationship between humans and the divine, and how prayers function. Elaborate on these two categories, providing specific examples from at least two different ANE cultures and demonstrating how Israel's monotheistic, covenantal relationship with Yahweh led to distinct prayer practices.

### Glossary of Key Terms

- **Amun-Re:** The Egyptian sun god, identified as a god who guarantees *ma'at* (justice) in the world.

- **Ancient Near East (ANE):** The geographical region and historical period encompassing ancient civilizations like Egypt, Mesopotamia (Sumer, Babylonia), Canaan (Ugarit), and the Hittite Empire, which were neighbors to ancient Israel.
- **Akitu Festival:** An ancient Mesopotamian new year festival, during which certain generalized lament compositions (Balegs and Urshimas) were sometimes used.
- **Balegs and Urshimas:** Later, more general and adaptable forms of Sumerian city laments, used for occasions like sanctuary restoration or festivals.
- **Baal:** A prominent Canaanite deity, often associated with storms and fertility, featured in Ugaritic texts with significant mythical imagery.
- **Canaanite:** A term referring to the cultures and peoples of the ancient Levant, including those found at Ugarit.
- **Declarative Praise:** A type of praise, often found in biblical Psalms (especially associated with individual laments), where the praying person recounts specific acts of God's intervention and answers to their prayers.
- **Dirges:** Funeral laments, characterized by mourning the loss of death. Dr. Young's lecture explicitly distinguishes these from the supplication laments under discussion.
- **Hittite Empire:** An ancient empire located in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), whose prayers and religious texts provide comparative material for understanding laments.
- **Incantations:** Ritualistic recitations or formulas, often accompanied by specific actions or objects (like amulets), believed to compel divine action or dispel evil, common in Mesopotamian prayers.
- **Isfet:** The Egyptian concept of chaos or injustice, the antithesis of *ma'at*.
- **Ishtar:** A major Mesopotamian goddess of love, war, and fertility, to whom some Sumerian lamentations are addressed.
- **Ma'at:** A central concept in ancient Egyptian religion and worldview, embodying justice, cosmic order, truth, balance, and righteousness.
- **Marduk:** The chief god of the city of Babylon and the national god of Babylonia, often named in personal introductions within Mesopotamian prayers.

- **Mesopotamian:** Referring to the ancient civilizations in the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, including Sumerian and Babylonian cultures.
- **Monotheistic Worldview:** The belief in one supreme God, characteristic of ancient Israel and distinct from the polytheistic views of its neighbors.
- **Mursili II:** A prominent Hittite king known for his "plague prayers," which reveal a transactional approach to the gods.
- **Muwatali II:** A Hittite king whose prayer invoked a large pantheon of deities (140 deities from 83 localities), illustrating the polytheistic nature of Hittite religion.
- **Parallelism:** A poetic device common in Hebrew and Ugaritic poetry, expressing an idea through two or three lines by repetition, synonyms, or antonyms.
- **Pantheon:** The collective gods of a people or religion.
- **Penitential Prayers:** Prayers characterized by an attempt to identify and confess sin to appease angered deities, though the specific offense often remains unspecified in ANE examples.
- **Polytheistic Worldview:** The belief in multiple gods, prevalent in most of Israel's Ancient Near Eastern neighbors.
- **Retribution Principle:** The belief that good deeds lead to good outcomes, and evil deeds lead to evil outcomes (act and consequence), a foundational concept in the Egyptian *ma'at* worldview.
- **Sumerian:** Pertaining to the ancient civilization of Sumer in southern Mesopotamia, known for its extensive collection of prayers, including city laments.
- **Sumerian City Laments:** A specific genre of Mesopotamian literature mourning the destruction and fall of cities and often recited during their rebuilding or restoration.
- **Supplication to the Deity:** Prayers where individuals ask for help, assistance, or mercy from their gods, which is the primary focus of Dr. Young's comparison.
- **Tefillah:** A Hebrew word for "prayer," noted by Hayes as having similar judicial associations to the Hittite term for prayer.

- **Transactional Worldview:** A perspective in prayer where the worshipper believes divine action is contingent upon human offerings, rituals, or arguments, implying a "quid pro quo" relationship with the gods.
- **Ugarit/Ugaritic:** An ancient Canaanite city in modern-day Syria, whose excavated texts provide insights into Canaanite religion and literature.
- **Votive Objects:** Items inscribed with prayers and placed in temples (especially in early Mesopotamia) to act as a proxy for the praying person's constant presence before the deity.
- **Yahweh:** The proper name of the God of Israel, emphasized as the one, sovereign, and intimate God in biblical laments.

#### 4) FAQs:

What is the primary focus of Dr. May Young's lecture on laments?

Dr. May Young's lecture primarily focuses on comparing laments found in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) with those from Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors, including Egypt, Canaan (Ugaritic and Hittite), and Mesopotamia (Sumerian and Babylonian). The aim is to identify similarities and differences, ultimately understanding what makes biblical laments unique and how these comparisons can be instructive. The lecture specifically examines "supplication to the deity" prayers, rather than dirges or funeral laments.

How do Egyptian prayers and laments compare to biblical examples?

Egyptian prayers, especially from the New Kingdom, are predominantly hymns characterized by extensive praise. They often begin with elaborate praise and blessing, with petitions appearing later as a justification for the preceding praise. A notable difference is the rarity of admitting sin or seeking mercy; individual faults are often attributed to ignorance rather than sin. This stems from their worldview centered on "Ma'at" (justice and cosmic order), where admitting guilt would disrupt balance and have negative afterlife consequences. Similarities include the belief that the deity (Amun-Re) guarantees justice, allowing people to petition for it, much like Israelites approaching Yahweh for justice against enemies. However, Egyptian prayers lack declarative praise for specific individual acts of the deity.

What are the key similarities and differences between Canaanite (Ugaritic and Hittite) laments and biblical laments?

Canaanite laments, particularly Ugaritic texts, share poetic styles like parallelism, similar themes (divine kingship, victory over enemies, underworld), and some vocabulary with biblical Psalms. However, a significant difference is the Ugaritic focus on devotion to the dead, which is not prevalent in the Bible, as the Israelite deity is portrayed as the God of the living. Ugaritic texts also feature more mythical imagery and are not categorized in the same way as biblical laments. Hittite prayers, especially later royal prayers, are more specific to individuals and situations, seeking help from a pantheon of gods (e.g., one prayer invoking 140 deities). A key distinction is their "transactional worldview," where petitioners bargain with gods, promising rewards for divine intervention, and prayers are seen as arguments to persuade deities. This contrasts sharply with the biblical emphasis on relationship and righteousness over transactional sacrifice (Micah 6:8).

How do Mesopotamian laments differ from biblical laments, particularly regarding transactional mindsets and sin?

Mesopotamian prayers, common in Sumer and Babylonia, are often inscribed on votive objects left in temples, acting as proxies for continuous prayer, or later, written as letters to deities. They share elements like invocation, praise, complaint, and petition with biblical laments, and often use similar phrasing. However, they typically begin with extensive praise, unlike biblical laments which often end with praise. Mesopotamian prayers also include formal self-introductions of the praying person, reflecting a distance between humans and high gods. They are highly transactional, accompanied by rituals, sacrifices, and gifts to appease gods and ensure requests are granted. Penitential prayers seek to appease angered deities for unspecified sins, often relying on incantations, amulets, and specific ritual actions. Unlike Israel, Mesopotamians often pleaded ignorance regarding the specific sins that angered the gods, given their polytheistic worldview.

What is the role of intermediaries in Mesopotamian laments compared to biblical laments?

In Mesopotamian prayers, intermediaries play a crucial role due to their polytheistic worldview and the hierarchical nature of their gods. People would pray to personal or local gods, who would then intercede on their behalf with higher-ranking deities. This suggests individuals did not have a direct, personal relationship with the ultimate high

gods. This concept of intermediaries is fundamentally absent in biblical laments. In the Hebrew Bible, the psalmist can directly approach Yahweh without needing a third party or another deity to intercede, reflecting a direct and intimate relationship between God and His people.

What are the foundational theological differences between Israel's view of God and that of its ancient Near Eastern neighbors, as reflected in their prayers?

The primary foundational theological differences lie in the nature of the divine-human relationship. Israel's monotheistic worldview contrasts with the polytheistic worldview of its neighbors. This leads to several distinctions:

1. **Intimacy:** Israel's prayers reflect an intimate, covenantal relationship with Yahweh, allowing direct address and vulnerability without formal introductions or extensive initial praise. In contrast, polytheistic systems often create a sense of distance, requiring formality, extensive praise, and intermediaries.
2. **Sin and Guilt:** Biblical laments feature free admission of sin and distress, and a willingness to identify with past generations' wrongdoings. Neighboring cultures often denied sin, attributed it to ignorance, or sought to distance themselves from ancestral guilt to maintain cosmic order or avoid displeasing a multitude of gods.
3. **Nature of Praise:** While neighbors offered general praise for the gods' character, biblical laments often include "declarative praise" for specific, individual acts of Yahweh's intervention in the history of His people and individuals. This testifies to God hearing and answering prayers.

How do the "transactional" nature of ancient Near Eastern prayers contrast with the function of biblical lament?

Ancient Near Eastern prayers are often transactional, viewing the interaction with gods as a bargain or a legal argument. Hittite prayers, for instance, were literal arguments to persuade gods, offering rewards or performing specific rituals to ensure a positive outcome. Mesopotamian prayers similarly involved sacrifices, gifts, and incantations as steps to appease deities and guarantee a desired result. This "step-by-step process" implies answers are dependent on correct performance.

In stark contrast, biblical lament is not transactional, formulaic, or an incantation. It emphasizes a relationship where Yahweh values righteousness and justice more than mere sacrifices. While vows of praise may be offered, they are part of a process of transition from lament to praise, not a guarantee of outcome. Biblical laments involve pouring out one's heart to God in full surrender and vulnerability, seeking relief and finding hope through genuine engagement, rather than manipulating or bargaining with the divine.

What can modern believers learn from comparing biblical laments with those of ancient Near Eastern cultures?

Comparing biblical laments with those of ancient Near Eastern cultures highlights the unique nature of Israel's relationship with Yahweh and provides valuable lessons for modern believers. It reinforces that lament is a universal human response to suffering, but its practice in the Bible is distinct. Believers can learn to:

1. **Approach God with Confidence and Intimacy:** Unlike ancient peoples who needed formal introductions or intermediaries, New Testament believers have access to God through Christ and the Holy Spirit, enabling intimate and direct communication.
2. **Embrace Vulnerability and Honesty:** Biblical laments encourage freely admitting pain, distress, and sin without pretense, unlike cultures that sought to deny or rationalize wrongdoing.
3. **Trust in God's Character and Action, Not Transaction:** Understanding that God is not persuaded by ritualistic transactions but desires a righteous relationship fosters a different approach to prayer, emphasizing surrender and trust rather than bargaining or manipulation.
4. **Recognize God's Responsiveness:** The existence of declarative praise in the Psalms testifies that God hears and answers the cries of His people, providing assurance that lamenting is not "casting prayers into an abyss" but engaging with a responsive Heavenly Father.