

Dr. May Young, Recovering Biblical Laments

Comparing Laments from Israel's ANE neighbors

Session 2 – 6-min. Video Overview

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You know, crying out for help when times get tough- that's about as human as it gets. But what if the way we cry out, the way we complain, actually reveals everything about what we believe? We're going to dive into these ancient prayers called laments, and you'll see just how much they tell us about how people saw their gods, and maybe how they saw themselves. Have you ever been there? In a situation that's so tough, so overwhelming, that you just want to scream into the void? You're just hoping that someone or something is actually listening.

It's a feeling we all know. And it turns out, it's a feeling that goes back thousands of years. The people of the ancient world, yeah, they felt this exact same way.

From Egypt to Mesopotamia, they all developed a specific way to pray when they were suffering. They didn't just shout into the wind; they actually formalized their cries for help into this very specific kind of prayer, the lament. It was their structured, official way of asking a god for help.

But here's the thing. How you approach a god says a lot about what you think of them. And when we put the biblical laments side by side with those of their neighbors, well, we find two completely different styles.

And I mean right from the very first word. The difference is just immediate. In places like Egypt and Mesopotamia, your prayer almost always had to start with this long, elaborate session of praise.

You had to flatter the deity, you know, butter them up before you even dared to ask for anything. But the biblical approach? Totally different. The psalmists often just jump right in, hey God, and get straight to the complaint.

No flattery required. I love this analogy from Dr. May Young for the Egyptian style. It's perfect, right? It's like when a kid suddenly starts telling you how great you are out of the blue.

You know a request is coming. That was the whole mindset. Praise was just step one to get the god in a good enough mood to even hear you out.

And over in Mesopotamia, it was even more formal, more distant. The person praying would literally have to introduce themselves like they were in a royal court. I am so-and-so, son of so-and-so.

Think about that. It shows this huge sense of distance. You have to state your name and your whole family tree just to get an audience.

It's a world away from the direct, personal cries we see in the psalms. Okay, so the opening lines are different. But the differences don't stop there.

They get even more stark when we look at how these cultures handled the idea of guilt and sin in their prayers. Was it something you were supposed to deny, claim you knew nothing about, or just own up to? So check this out. We've got three completely different strategies for dealing with sin.

For the Egyptians, you deny it because you have to maintain cosmic order. For the Mesopotamians, you plead ignorance because, I mean, with so many gods, who could possibly keep track? But for the biblical writers, they did the exact opposite. They openly admitted their faults.

Now, to really get the Egyptian view, you have to understand this concept of ma'at. This was the idea of cosmic balance, of universal order and justice. So for an Egyptian, admitting you did something wrong wasn't just a personal failure.

It was admitting you were actively contributing to chaos in the entire universe. It had real cosmic consequences. So of course, the default position was always denial.

And this number, wow. This just perfectly illustrates the problem in Mesopotamia. Get this.

A single prayer from a single Hittite king called on 140 different gods. Can you imagine trying to appease a list that long? How could you possibly know which one you'd ticked off or what rule you'd broken? Pleading ignorance wasn't just a cop-out. It was a pretty logical response to a crazy complex divine world.

The Hittites had another tactic, too. They would try to draw a line in the sand and blame the sins of past generations. They'd basically say, look, our fathers sinned, sure, but we're innocent.

Which is, again, the polar opposite of what you see in the Psalms, where the writer often connects with the sins of their ancestors as part of a shared story with God. So all of this brings us to the real heart of the matter. What was prayer actually for? Was it a transaction like a business deal designed to get a specific result? Or was it about a relationship, a way to actually process what you're going through with the divine? For so many of Israel's neighbors, prayer was fundamentally transactional.

It worked just like a deal. You bring the right gifts, you perform the right rituals, you say the magic words, and boom, you expect a specific outcome. It was a formula.

You do this for me, I'll do this for you. But the biblical model? It presents prayer as something totally different, relational. It's a raw, vulnerable conversation.

The goal isn't just to get something from God, but to engage with God through the suffering. It's about processing the pain in his presence. The relationship itself is the point, not just the final result.

So in the real world, this transactional model looked something like this. You'd bring sacrifices to get God on your side. Then you'd promise even better rewards, more bread, more offerings, if they actually fixed your problem.

And you had to follow these super-specific rituals, almost like a magic spell, to make sure you got the result you wanted. It was all about performance. And then, bam, you get this powerful counter-statement from the prophet Micah.

The people are offering more and more, bigger and bigger sacrifices, thinking that's what God wants. But God's response, through Micah, is so clear. I don't want your transactions.

I want a relationship. I want you to act justly, love mercy, and just walk humbly with me. So when you put it all together, what we find in the biblical laments isn't just a different style of prayer.

What you're seeing is a completely revolutionary view of the relationship between human beings and God. I mean, this chart really says it all, doesn't it? For Israel's neighbors, prayer was overwhelmingly focused on appeasement and getting a result. But for the biblical writers, the prayer itself- that process of wrestling and working through suffering with God- was the focus.

So the biblical difference is just profound. First, you didn't need some other god to put in a good word for you. You had direct access.

You didn't have to put on a show. You could come with raw, brutal honesty. The foundation wasn't a contract that could be broken, but a covenant, a relationship.

And, crucially, the conversation didn't just end with a complaint. You also have what's called declarative praise, entire psalms written specifically to say thank you after a prayer was answered. And that last point, that is a huge deal.

The very fact that there are whole psalms dedicated to thanking God for specifically answering a previous cry for help, that's unique and incredibly powerful. It's the Bible's way of recording that these laments, these cries of pain, they weren't just shouting into an empty room. They were part of a real conversation with a God who actually listens and responds.

So this whole journey through ancient history leaves us with a very modern question. Right here, right now. When we are suffering, how do we cry out for help? Is it a transaction, an attempt to bargain our way out of pain? Or is it a vulnerable, honest conversation with a God we actually believe is relational and present and listening? The way we complain might just reveal everything about the God we truly believe in.