

Dr. May Young, Recovering Biblical Lament

Session 2 - Comparing Laments from Israel's ANE neighbors

AI Podcast Audio Overview

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Welcome to the Deep Dive, your shortcut to getting truly well-informed. We really try to uncover surprising insights, give you the tools, you know, to understand even topics that seem, well, ancient or maybe a bit niche. And today we're definitely doing that.

We're jumping into the world of lament. Right, lament. But we should really clarify what we mean by that, shouldn't we? Yeah, good point.

So when we say lament today, we're not really talking about, like, funeral songs or mourning the dead. No. Our focus is specifically on prayers of supplication, crying out to a god or a deity, asking for help when you're in distress, that kind of thing.

Exactly. And our mission, our goal for this Deep Dive, is to look at these laments from ancient Israel's neighbors and put them side by side with the biblical ones. We want to see what's different, what's maybe surprisingly similar, and figure out what makes biblical lament stand out.

And hopefully what makes it, you know, useful, instructive for you today. We'll be hitting some major ancient players: Egypt, the Canaanite world, so that includes places like Ugarit, maybe some Hittite stuff. Okay.

And then Mesopotamia. So Sumerian and Babylonian texts too. Quite a tour.

It is. And the big question we're keeping in mind is, you know, were these kinds of prayers common everywhere? And if they were, what, if anything, made the Israelite ones different? I think the answers might be pretty revealing. Agreed.

Should we start with Egypt? Let's do it. Egypt. What do we find there? Okay.

So ancient Egypt. If you look at the earlier periods, like the Old and Middle Kingdoms, you actually don't find a whole lot of these kinds of hymns or prayers. They're pretty scarce.

Really? So it wasn't a big part of their practice early on? It seems not as much, or at least not in the written record we have. It's really in the New Kingdom that we start seeing more texts like this pop up. Okay.

New Kingdom Egypt. So what did those prayers look like? Were they like the psalms, kind of raw and direct? Not usually, no. The dominant form in the New Kingdom was really the hymn.

Lots and lots of praise, often very descriptive, very extensive. Just praise. Mostly praise.

You don't often find direct complaints or laments, or even specific requests for help. And even thanking God for, you know, a specific thing they did for you personally. That's rare too.

It's more general praise of God's nature. So if you did need something, if you had a problem, how would you ask? Well, it seems like when petitions do show up, and this is more in the 19th dynasty, they almost always come after all that praise. It's like the praise sets the stage, justifies the request.

You know, like a kid saying, Mom, you look so nice today. Can I have 20 bucks? Right. The buttering up approach.

I get it. Exactly. And maybe even more striking, something almost completely missing, is any real admission of sin or asking for mercy? No confession.

Very little. If they mentioned faults, it was usually framed as, like, ignorance. I didn't know any better.

Generally, Egyptians just denied committing sin. Whoa. Denying sin altogether.

That feels really different from, say, Psalm 51. Why? Why would they do that? It ties right into their core worldview, this concept of *mat*. *Mat*.

Right. That's like cosmic order, justice, truth, balance. Exactly.

And they had a strong belief in retribution. Good deeds get rewarded. Bad deeds get punished.

So for an Egyptian, admitting you did something wrong wasn't just like, embarrassing. It was more than that. Oh, yeah.

It would actually upset the cosmic balance *ma'at*. It contributes to chaos, which they called *Isfet*. And it had real consequences, especially for the afterlife.

You know, the whole heart being weighed against a feather. Admitting sin could tip the scales. Wow.

Okay. So admitting guilt was cosmically dangerous. That changes everything about how you'd approach a God.

It really does. But here's an interesting similarity with Israel. Okay.

Both the Egyptians praying to Amun-Re, who is seen as the guarantor of *mat*, and the Israelites praying to Yahweh, who administers justice. Both saw their main God as the ultimate source and upholder of justice. Ah, so both cultures could appeal to their God for justice.

Yes. They could both see their enemies, for instance, as disrupting that divine order and ask the God to step in. That underlying belief in a just God is a key parallel.

Got it. Okay. So that's Egypt.

Let's move over to Canaan. Starting with Ugarit. What do those texts show us? Right.

Ugarit. Late Bronze Age city, modern Syria. Now, the texts we have from there are mostly things like administrative records or big narrative poems, myths.

So not exactly a book of Psalms, then? No, not directly comparable to biblical Psalms of lament. You don't find that one-to-one match in genre. But surely there are connections, shared styles or ideas.

Oh, absolutely. You definitely see a shared poetic style, especially parallelism. The A is like B or A is the opposite of B, that kind of thing.

Exactly. That's a huge feature of Hebrew poetry too. And you find common themes: divine kingship, God's winning victories, God's having councils, talk about the underworld, even some shared words, though maybe spelled a bit differently.

So style and themes overlap. But what about the big differences? What makes Ugaritic stuff distinct? Well, one big thing is devotion to the dead. That pops up in Ugaritic texts, but it's a major no-no in the Bible, where Yahweh is strictly the God of the living.

And you also get a lot more emphasis on mythical imagery in the Ugaritic poems, often tied to their storm god, Baal, way more than you typically find in the Psalms. So interesting for background, but not a direct template for biblical lament. Exactly.

They shed light on the general poetic world, but they're not direct parallels for the Psalms or hymns. They help indirectly. Okay.

What about the Hittites then? Still in the Canaanite sphere, broadly speaking, up in modern Turkey. Any closer parallels there? Not a huge number, actually. The earlier Hittite prayers we have from maybe the 17th century BC seem pretty general.

But later on, you get these royal prayers that are very specific. They're tied to the king or the royal family, asking for help for the kingdom or for personal problems, help against enemies, stopping plagues, curing sickness. So supplication, asking for help, is definitely there.

What's the most striking thing about Hittite prayer compared to Israel? Oh, hands down, the polytheism. It's just, wow. There's one prayer from a king, Mutali II, where he calls on 140 different gods.

140. Yep. From 83 different towns or regions.

Imagine trying to keep track of all those divine relationships. That sounds exhausting and totally different from Israel's focus on Yahweh alone. Completely different.

And that massive polytheism leads straight into another huge difference. Their whole approach to prayer was highly transactional. Transactional, meaning? Meaning it was often like making a deal.

You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Petitioners would literally bargain with the gods. They'd promise rewards like, okay, sun goddess Serena, if you stop this plague, we'll give you loads of bread and drinks.

So it wasn't just asking; it was negotiating, offering payment. Pretty much. In fact, get this, the Hittite word for prayer is actually related linguistically to the word for argument.

Argument. Like you're trying to argue the gods into helping. It suggests that mindset.

Yeah. Persuading the gods, making your case, maybe even haggling a bit. Now, some Hebrew prayer words have legal vibes too, but the overall feeling in the Bible is very different.

And the prophets really pushed back against that transactional idea in Israel, didn't they? Oh, absolutely. You see it so clearly in Micah chapter six: the people are thinking, what does God want? More sacrifices, bigger sacrifices. Should we offer our firstborn? They're escalating the transaction.

Micah says basically, no, that's not the point. He's already shown you what's good. What does the Lord require? Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.

It's about the relationship, about your heart and actions, not just cutting a deal. That's such a powerful contrast. You mentioned a specific comparison between a Hittite prayer and Psalms 88 and 89.

Yeah. There are some interesting points there. Both the Hittite prayer- I think it's Merury II's plague prayer- and those Psalms can end in darkness, right? Still waiting for God to act.

Okay. Yeah. Psalm 88 especially is bleak.

Right. And both the Hittite prayer and Psalm 89 have a strong royal connection, reflecting on past good times with the deity. But the differences are really telling.

How so? Well, Psalm 88 is intensely personal, individual suffering. The Hittite king, though, he's speaking for the whole nation. He's like the chief priest making the case for everyone.

So individual versus national, what else? How they handle guilt. It's a huge difference. The Hittite prayer really tries to push blame onto the previous generation.

Mercy basically says, "My dad broke a vow. That's why we have this plague, but I'm innocent. He distances himself.

Okay. Psalm 89, though, talks about the covenant with David's line, acknowledges the connection to the past, but doesn't try to legally absolve the current generation in the same way. And crucially, unlike the Hittite prayers, which often try to figure out why the gods are angry, Psalms 88 and 89 don't actually identify the specific reason for God's wrath.

They don't diagnose the problem. No. The focus is just crying out for relief, pleading with God rather than figuring out the exact cause or trying to assign blame.

Interesting. Okay. Let's pivot again.

Mesopotamia. Our sources say this region has the biggest collection of prayers that we can compare to the Bible. Yeah, that's right.

Sumer, Babylonia, we've got a lot more material from there that looks like lament or supplication. How did they typically offer these prayers? Well, early on, a common way was to inscribe the prayer onto an object like a bowl or a weapon, sometimes even a little statue of the worshiper. These were called votive objects.

And they'd leave these in the temple. Exactly. They acted as sort of proxies, standing in for the person, keeping their prayer constantly before the God, day and night.

That's clever. Like a permanent prayer request. What happened when those got too expensive? People started just writing the prayers down like letters and leaving those in the temples.

And much like we saw with the Hittites and even the Egyptians, to some extent, these prayers were often paired with action. Rituals and stuff. Rituals, sacrifices, gifts, things designed to, you know, appease the gods, maybe motivate them to actually answer the prayer.

Again, that transactional element is often there. Seems like a recurring theme outside of Israel. So how do these Mesopotamian prayers stack up against biblical laments, like if we compared one side by side? Okay, let's take a typical Sumerian or Babylonian lament, maybe one to the goddess Ishtar.

You'll find similar building blocks. Calling on the God, praising them, complaining about the problem, asking for help. Shared structure.

Yeah. And even common phrases pop up like, "How long, O Lord? Well, how long, O Ishtar? You see similar poetic tricks and themes too. But.

But. Big differences too. Remember the Egyptian prayers starting with tons of praise.

Same thing here, often. Mesopotamian laments usually kicked off with extensive praise. Which biblical laments generally don't do, right? They often dive right into the complaint.

Exactly. Biblical laments tend to end with praise or a vow of praise, not start with it. The psalmist often just addresses God directly, sometimes quite bluntly, right from the get-go.

That directness again. Any other differences at the start of the prayer? Yes. Mesopotamian prayers often include a very formal self-introduction.

Like, I am Job Logs. My personal God is Marduk. My city is Babylon.

Introducing yourself to the God. Yeah. It reflects a certain distance, doesn't it? Like you're approaching a great king or official.

You state who you are, who you belong to. That kind of formal intro is totally missing in the biblical Psalms. What do you think? Well, the Psalms portray Yahweh differently.

He's a refuge, a shield, someone intimately close. Psalm 139 talks about God knowing the person before they were even formed. There's no need for that formal introduction.

There's an assumed intimacy. That's a huge difference in relationship. What about the praise itself? Was it praising God for specific things he'd done, like in the Psalms? Not usually, no.

The praise in Mesopotamian prayers tended to be about the god's general status and power within the whole pantheon, the world of the gods. It wasn't typically focused on you did this amazing thing for me personally. Ah, so general divine attributes versus specific personal interventions.

Right. It reinforces that sense of distance compared to Israelite praise, which often celebrates God-specific actions in history for the nation or for the individual praying. Got it.

Yeah. Now, I also saw mentions of penitential prayers and even incantations in Mesopotamia. How did those fit in? So penitential prayers were ways to confess sin and try to, well, calm down an angry God.

But crucially, they were often linked directly with incantations and specific ritual actions. Like magic spells? Sort of. Things like using special amulets or putting blood on the doorposts or burning certain things- specific steps you took alongside the prayer to try and make the suffering stop.

And you don't find that kind of recipe in the Psalms? No. Biblical Psalms just aren't incantations. There are no instructions embedded saying wear this charm or burn that herb to guarantee relief.

Okay. And when they did confess sin, was it specific or? Often, like the Egyptians, they pleaded ignorance. But the reason was different.

How so? It wasn't about upsetting cosmic order like the Mesopotamians with their huge pantheon of gods. Right. The 140 Hittite gods came to mind.

Exactly. They might genuinely not know which God they defected or what they'd done wrong. What pleases one God might anger another.

It was confusing. So they'd often say, I don't know what sin I committed or which God is angry with, but please forgive me anyway. It's a direct result of polytheism.

Makes sense. Keeping track would be impossible. Did they have anyone to help them navigate that, like go-betweens? Yes, very much so.

It was common to appeal to your personal sort of local God to then go and plead your case before one of the higher, more powerful gods in the pantheon. So intermediaries were standard practice. Yeah.

It reflected this whole divine hierarchy. No single God had absolute power. And the average person didn't usually have a direct line to the top God.

They needed someone to intercede. Which is, again, a massive contrast with the Israelite idea of direct access to Yahweh. Huge contrast.

Okay. One last thing on Mesopotamia before we pull it all together. City laments.

Right. The Sumerian city laments. These are a bit different, a distinct genre.

They're more corporate, communal. They mourn the destruction of a whole city, like the famous lamentation over the destruction of Ur. And these connect to the Bible.

They definitely help us understand the background for the biblical book of Lamentations, which mourns Jerusalem's fall. These Sumerian laments share themes like, you know, the city being destroyed, people scattered, the city's God deciding to abandon it. Sounds bleak.

It is, but they also often include themes of hope, the eventual restoration of the city, the rebuilding of the temple, the return of the protector God. They were sometimes recited liturgically when rebuilding was happening. So even in destruction, there was an eye towards restoration.

Fascinating. It really underscores that point, doesn't it? Yeah. That biblical literature, including lament, didn't just appear out of nowhere.

Absolutely not. It grew in a world that already had these forms, these ideas. Israel was influenced by its neighbors.

You can see the similarities. But the differences are where the really profound theological insights lie. Right.

The similarities show us perhaps universal human things. I think so. The experience of suffering, the need to cry out for help from something or someone bigger than yourself when times get tough, that seems universal.

And the belief shared across these cultures that there are divine powers who care about justice, who can bring healing or relief, who are more powerful than humans. Okay. So acknowledging those similarities, let's really nail down the foundational differences.

What truly sets biblical lament apart from all these neighbors? I think we can group them into two main areas. First is the whole understanding of the relationship between humans and the divine. Okay.

The polytheism everywhere else just made true intimacy difficult. How could you be intimate with 140 gods or even a handful? It shaped how they viewed sin, either as ignorance or as just the practical problem of tracking who you offended. Which led to needing intermediaries.

Right. And that very formal, almost distant approach- the self-introductions, the gifts, the extensive buttering-up praise just to hopefully get a hearing- and praise itself stayed general

about God's cosmic status, not usually about specific personal help, reinforcing that distance. And the biblical picture? It's just radically different.

The Old Testament insists Yahweh is the only God. He's the creator, intimately involved, the sustainer. Psalm 139, he knows you before you're born.

So no need for formal introductions? None. You can come directly. No pretense, no need for massive opening praise, no intermediaries required.

Biblical laments show this amazing freedom. You can admit guilt. You can declare innocence.

You don't need to distance yourself from your ancestors' sins in the same legalistic way. It's about a direct, honest relationship. Exactly.

And, you know, for you, as a New Testament believer, that access is even more profound through Christ and the Holy Spirit. There's this incredible confidence we can have. And the psalms themselves show us that God listens and answers.

That's what the vows of praise and the Thanksgiving psalms are all about. That intimacy and access is just huge. Okay, what's the second main difference? It's about how the prayers actually function.

What are they for? Right. We saw the transactional argument aspect elsewhere. Exactly.

Neighboring prayers were often these transactions, these arguments backed up by sacrifices or offerings intended to motivate the gods. And they often included those incantations or specific ritual actions, the amulets, the burning stuff, almost like a formula, a step-by-step process to try and guarantee a good outcome. Maybe it felt, I don't know, safer than just being vulnerable.

Trying to control the process, maybe? Perhaps. But again, the biblical contrast is stark. Yahweh, as Micah says, values righteousness and justice more than just piles of sacrifices.

The vows of praise you find in the psalms, they aren't incantations. They're not guarantees of a specific result. So what are they? They seem to be part of a process, a movement or transition within the prayer, from lament towards hope and praise.

Biblical lament isn't a formula you follow. It's not a transaction. It's not trying to manipulate God.

It's something else entirely. It's this profound act of just pouring out your heart, complete honesty, full surrender, total vulnerability, before a god understood as a loving heavenly father. And often it's through that very process of honest, vulnerable lament that the person praying finds a new perspective, finds hope again.

Think of Job or Habakkuk after their encounters with God. So recovering biblical lament isn't about finding a magic formula, but embracing that vulnerable, honest engagement with God. That's it.

Exactly. It's built on relationship, not transaction. Wow.

We have covered a lot of ground today, really highlighting how unique biblical lament is when you see it against the backdrop of the ancient Near East. That emphasis on intimacy, direct access, vulnerability. It's so different from the transactional, ritualistic approaches we saw elsewhere.

Yeah. It really points to a fundamentally different understanding of God and how humans relate to him. So as we wrap up this deep dive, here's something to think about.

Given everything we've unpacked about this profound intimacy, this non-transactional nature of biblical lament, what might that mean for your own approach to prayer? How might it shape your conversations with God when you're facing your own deepest struggles and desires?