

Comparing Laments from Israel's Ancient Near Eastern Neighbors

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Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Ancient Near East, Laments, Psalms, Egypt, Ugarit, Hittites, Mesopotamia, Polytheism, Monotheism, Covenant

Abstract

This lecture by Dr. May Young compares ancient Near Eastern lament literature from Egyptian, Canaanite (Ugaritic), Hittite, and Mesopotamian traditions with biblical laments found in the Old Testament. While Israel shared poetic forms, imagery, and vocabulary with its neighbors, biblical laments differ fundamentally in their theological foundation, moving away from polytheistic bargaining, incantations, and transactional appeasement toward a monotheistic relationship defined by covenant intimacy and direct petition. Ultimately, comparing these traditions highlights the unique character of biblical Psalms, which encourage believers to approach God with honest vulnerability and trust rather than ritualistic manipulation.

Outline

I. Introduction to Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) Laments (Session 2)

- A. Overview of Comparative Study: Similarities, Differences, and Theological Lessons
- B. Distinguishing Dirges (Funeral Laments) from Supplications/Laments in the Psalms
- C. Core Scope: Egyptian, Canaanite/Ugaritic, Hittite, and Mesopotamian Texts

II. Egyptian Prayers and Laments

- A. Historical Development Across Dynasties
 - 1. Old and Middle Kingdom: Few surviving parallels to biblical prayers
 - 2. New Kingdom (18th Dynasty): Predominantly hymns characterized by descriptive praise
 - 3. 19th Dynasty: Introduction of petitions following extensive praise
- B. Comparison with Biblical Laments
 - 1. Structure: Egyptian prayers begin with praise/flattery ("buttering up") before making requests
 - 2. Absence of Declarative Praise/Thanksgiving for specific divine acts in official temple worship
 - 3. Denial of Sin: Preference to frame errors as ignorance rather than admit guilt
- C. Cultural and Worldview Context
 - 1. The Principle of Ma'at (Justice, Cosmic Order, Truth, and Balance)
 - 2. Retribution Principle: Admitting sin was viewed as contributing to cosmic chaos (Isfet)

3. Divine Role: Amun-Re as guarantor of Ma'at; Pharaoh as earthly administrator

III. Canaanite and Ugaritic Comparisons

- A. Literary Discoveries from Late Bronze Age Ugarit (Modern Syria)
 1. Textual nature: Mostly administrative lists and narrative poems rather than psalmody
 2. Shared Poetic Conventions: Parallelism, divine kingship themes, victory over enemies, divine counsel
- B. Key Structural and Conceptual Differences
 1. Distinctive focus on devotion to the dead in Ugaritic literature
 2. Prominence of Baal mythologies and cosmic imagery
 3. Mixture of genres within single poems (descriptive praise, vows, complaints)
 4. Broad Polytheistic Worldview vs. Biblical Monotheism

IV. Hittite Royal Prayers

- A. Historical Context and Form
 1. Old Kingdom (17th Century BC): General prayers
 2. New Empire: Specific royal prayers recited by kings for plagues, enemies, and illnesses
 3. Extensive Polytheism: Invocation of pantheons (e.g., King Muwatalli II invoking 140 deities)
- B. The Transactional Nature of Hittite Prayer
 1. Strategic Bargaining: Offering bread/libations in exchange for eliminating plagues (King Mursili II)
 2. Prayers as Legal Arguments (aquar / judicial persuasion)
 3. Contrast with Biblical Worldview: God demands justice, mercy, and humility rather than escalating ritual transactions (Micah 6:8)
- C. Detailed Comparison: Mursili's First Plague Prayer vs. Psalms 88 & 89
 1. Similarities: Remaining in darkness/waiting for intervention; strong royal character
 2. Differences: Individual personal suffering (Psalm 88) vs. King acting as priest for national guilt; Psalm 89 identifies with past generations rather than trying to absolve current guilt

V. Mesopotamian Prayers (Sumerian and Babylonian)

- A. Mediums and Formats
 1. Inscriptions on votive objects (bowls, weapons, statues) placed in temples as constant proxies
 2. Evolution to written letters left at temples as votive objects became too costly
 3. Accompaniment by ritual actions, gifts, and sacrifices to motivate deities
- B. Structural and Theological Contrasts
 1. Extensive initial praise and formal self-introductions (reflecting distance from the divine)
 2. Praise focused on the god's existence among deities rather than acts in human history
 3. Penitential prayers and incantations aimed at appeasement via amulets and ritual directions
 4. Role of Intermediary Deities: Personal gods required to intercede with high gods
- C. Sumerian City Laments
 1. Corporate genre mourning fallen cities (e.g., Ur) and temple destruction

2. Structure: Destructive event, divine abandonment, temple rebuilding, return of protector god
3. Relationship to the Book of Lamentations: Shared cultural forms utilized with distinct theological content

VI. Summary and Theological Implications for Recovering Biblical Lament

A. Universal Shared Experience

1. Shared recognition of human limitation, suffering, and need for divine intervention
2. Belief in divine beings who uphold justice and transcend physical reality

B. Core Theological Differences

1. Relational Intimacy vs. Polytheistic Distance: Yahweh is a covenant God who knows the psalmist intimately (Psalm 139) without need for third-party intermediaries or ritual introductions
2. Relational Process vs. Transactional Incantation: Biblical lament is an unfeigned pouring out of the heart, transitioning through lament to genuine hope and praise
3. Direct Access and Confidence: New Testament believers approach the throne of grace through Christ and the Holy Spirit with total vulnerability and assurance of being heard