

LAMENTATIONS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN MESOPOTAMIA AND JUDEA

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the discovery and publication of several Sumerian Lamentations, there has been an ongoing discussion concerning the possible connection with the Biblical Book of Lamentations (Eicha), which has been known to us for over 2 millennia. This is not surprising, since there are several similarities between Sumerian Laments and the Book of Lamentations. The question is whether these similarities indicate a connection and if so, what sort of connection. A short analysis of the Sumerian Laments – and especially the Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur – and of the Biblical Book of Lamentations will be followed by a comparison of their style and content.

LAMENTATION OVER THE DESTRUCTION OF UR

The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur was first published by S.N. Kramer in 1940. The most recent scholarly publication complete with transcription and translation was written by N. Samet in 2014. All 92 known manuscripts are from the Old Babylonian period (OB, ca. 19th-16th century BCE). The Ur Lament is unique in the sense that it is the only Sumerian Lament that has been fully reconstructed.¹

In accordance with the most recent research, there are two categories within the genre of laments that were established: City Laments and Cultic Laments. In total, there are five City Laments known to us: The Lament over Ur, The Lament over Sumer and Ur, The Lament over Uruk, The Lament over Eridu, and The Lament over Nippur. Most likely, the historic event they are all based on is the destruction of Ur in 2004 BCE.²

The most important difference between the two types of laments is the fact that City Laments are about specific cities, whereas Cultic Laments are texts that lament in more general terms. Furthermore, the Cultic Laments were ritually performed and there is much more known about their cultic setting.³ On the other hand, there is no evidence concerning a cultic setting in City

Laments. The performance of the City Laments seems to have been limited to a unique occasion, after which they probably just became literary works.⁴

The background of any lamenting literary work is an important key to understanding the literary text itself. Once the destroyed city bewailed in the Ur Lament was identified by scholars as Ur,⁵ it became easier to date the text and understand its historical and cultural background. However, it is important to emphasize the varying degree of historicity of the Sumerian Laments. They are literary compositions containing historical references, but they are not historical documents in the strict sense of the word. The degree of their historicity may however help us date them and order them chronologically.⁶

The earliest generally accepted terminus ante quem for all the Sumerian Laments together is 1925 BCE.⁷ The Ur Lament and the Sumer and Ur Lament appear to be the earliest of the Sumerian Laments, based on structural and phraseological parallels, such as more specific historic details, and a focus on destruction rather than restoration.

The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur contains 11 *kirugu* (chapters), each dealing with a somewhat separate theme within the story of the destruction, adding up to a total of 436 lines. The first *kirugu* describes the divine abandonment of cities and shrines, the second *kirugu* is about bewailing the abandonment. *Kirugu* three and four depict the patron goddess of Ur – Ningal – lamenting to her husband and patron god of Ur – Nanna. In the fifth *kirugu* the city of Ur is attacked by a storm and destroyed, in the sixth *kirugu* the devastation is described. In the seventh *kirugu* Ningal laments the destroyed city before Nanna, in the eighth *kirugu* Ningal is beseeched to return to her city. In *kirugu* nine and ten the storm is hoped to have passed forever, and finally in the eleventh *kirugu* Nanna is asked in the restored city of Ur to accept the lament's praise.⁸

Ningal's position in the lament text is ambiguous. On the one hand, she is implicitly blamed for the destruction since she abandoned her city.⁹ On the other hand, she wants and is urged to return to her city.¹⁰ The goddess seems powerless in the face of the inevitability of the destruction decreed by the great gods, whose decision she is trying to change, but with no success. Eventually, even her return to the city will depend on the great gods' approval. The accusations towards Ningal seem to be merely rhetorical since

she cannot be held responsible for what has occurred.¹¹ From a theological perspective, there is a sense of determinism present in the third and fourth *kirugu*, expressing the belief that reigns of kings and their dynasties come to a predestined and unalterable end. In the fourth *kirugu* Ningal tries to appeal the decision of the great gods to destroy Ur, but to no avail.¹²

The destruction eventually leads to the devastation described in the sixth *kirugu*, including bloody images such as corpses littering the outskirts of the city,¹³ the city gates¹⁴ and the streets.¹⁵ The breakdown of the social systems that were in place before the destruction is also emphasized.¹⁶

Samet compares typical idioms used in the lamentation texts, showing that there are several similar idioms used in all these laments when it comes to describing the devastation: ‘to roar’, ‘as an overflowing flood’, ‘to smash heads’, ‘to consume indiscriminately’, ‘Sumer writhes as in snare’, ‘to sweep’, and ‘The land-annihilating storm silenced the city’.¹⁷ Both the storm and the human enemy that are involved in the destruction, in the ‘human sphere’ and the ‘mythological-cosmic sphere’, destroyed whatever was around them indiscriminately.¹⁸ In addition, the storm seems to have features of the human enemies as well.¹⁹

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

The Biblical Book of Lamentations has been studied for centuries, since it has been known for about 2 millennia longer than the Sumerian Laments. It can be dated post quem for after 586 BCE, the year of the fall of Jerusalem. An estimation of the date of writing falls in the second half of the 6th century BCE.²⁰ A few of the reasons to date the Book of Lamentations not long after the fall of Jerusalem are that the memories portrayed in Lamentations still seem fresh and there is no testimony to the belief that the situation would soon improve.²¹

The Book of Lamentations consists of five chapters and a total of 154 lines.²² The different chapters or laments of the Book of Lamentations present the destruction from different perspectives, chapter one focusing on Jerusalem, destroyed as it is, chapter two portraying the moment of the destruction and the anger that is present. Chapter three concerns the exile, while chapter four relives the siege, focusing on the people. Chapter five is the prayer of the survivor.²³

On a deeper level, there is much to say about what sentiments and theology lie beneath the surface of the Book of Lamentations. Hillers emphasizes that the facts about the fall of Jerusalem are already described in the Bible, in the Book of Kings. Lamentations, on the other hand, “supplies the meaning of the facts,” telling us not just of the fall of the city of Jerusalem, but of the spiritual significance behind it. Lamentations is also a confirmation of the prophetic judgement on the sin of the people.²⁴

Berlin further confirms the focus on the present. Aside from the last few verses, “Lamentations does not look forward and does not look back, does not dwell on what went before or will come after – its gaze is fixed directly on the event itself.” Furthermore, she warns that Lamentations tends to be non-specific about details, and for example completely leaves Babylonia out of the story.²⁵ It seems that although Lamentations is about a historical event, it should not necessarily be considered a historical document.

The suffering portrayed in the Book of Lamentation is spread out over all genders, ages and classes, and the destruction destroys the hierarchy that give these categories meaning.²⁶

In an attempt to categorize the Book of Lamentations, Berlin combines two genres consisting of a classic term and a modern term that scholars have identified with Lamentations: ‘Qinah’ (a biblical funeral dirge or eulogy) and ‘communal lament’²⁷ (a medium with which a community can express complaint, sorrow and grief over a calamity and appeal for deliverance), and proposes a new (sub)genre, the ‘Jerusalem lament’, since there was a “new historical situation” and “new theological need”. Along with the Book of Lamentations, she includes Psalms 44, 69, 74, 79, 102 and 137 in this genre. Furthermore, she disagrees with Dobbs-Allsopp²⁸ on the theoretical existence of city laments for other Israelite or Judean cities. Jerusalem, as opposed to other cities in Israel and Judah, had a unique place in biblical religion, therefore the destruction of Jerusalem and a lament thereof would always have a fundamentally different position and meaning.²⁹

COMPARISON

The genre of lamentations over the destruction of cities and temples is very specific to the region of the Near East. The genre is exclusively represented

by the Sumerian Laments and the biblical Book of Lamentations.³⁰ It is therefore not surprising that most studies of the Book of Lamentations have included the Sumerian City Laments since they were first published. The leading question in this comparison has been the case of direct or indirect influence. Opinions vary on the spectrum of influence, including the suggestion that the similarities could be explained as a Near Eastern literary tradition of response to destruction altogether.³¹

A strong argument against any connection between the Sumerian Laments and the Biblical Book of Lamentations has always been the big gap in time between them.³² Since the Book of Lamentations was written in the 6th century BCE and the latest manuscript of the Sumerian Laments is from the 16th century BCE, a gap of about a millennium separates them. Subsequently, direct influence seems to be out of the question.³³ An important element in the comparison between the Book of Lamentations and the Sumerian Lament tradition is therefore finding a way to bridge this gap in time.

It is possible that Judeans were familiar with the Sumerian Laments even if they were written long before the destruction of Jerusalem. In the Book of Daniel (1:3-4) some of the young elite were ordered by the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, to be sent to the Babylonian court to be taught there, and eventually seem to have acquired high positions within the government (2:49). Half of the book is written in Aramaic, the popular language in Babylonia at that time, the other half in Hebrew. It is likely that someone of the elite, already educated earlier in Mesopotamian language and literature, would have composed the Book of Lamentations.

More evidence of contact between the cultures is the recently published Al-Yahudu archive. The Al-Yahudu corpus consists of documents concerning the Judean exiles in Babylonia, and dates from 572 BCE until 477 BCE, relatively close to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.³⁴ This archive is the first extra-biblical archive on day-to-day life and business of Judeans in exile in Babylonia,³⁵ and overlaps with the estimated time when the Biblical Book of Lamentations was written, namely in between 586 and 538 BCE, or the dating preferred by Berlin, 540-520 BCE.

The Al-Yahudu archive seems to show specific business connections between the city of the Judeans and Babylon itself. For example, text 45 of the archive³⁶ concerns a division of inherited business shares between five

sons, of which a duplicate was already published.³⁷ The witnesses to the document include persons with West Semitic or Yahwistic names. This definitely shows that the Judeans in their city in exile had business in Babylon, and travelled there. It is possible to conclude that a group of Judeans may have settled in Babylon and kept contact with other Judeans in the provinces.³⁸ Through this, Judeans may have become familiar with the Sumerian Laments.

P. Ferris concludes in his dissertation on the 'Genre of Communal Lament' that through comparing the 'communal laments' in Psalms and the Sumerian *balaġ* and *eršemma* texts, and based on a limited but undeniable contact historically, socially and linguistically, the Sumerian and Hebrew prayers could be placed in a historical-cultural continuum. His data still does not support a direct borrowing from the Babylonians during exile, but he thinks it reasonable to assume that "indeed Israel did learn from her neighbours."³⁹ Still, this does not provide ample evidence of a direct connection between the two lament traditions. A similar opinion was expressed earlier by Hillers, who concluded that we are dealing with a "literary convention common to Mesopotamian and biblical literature, and not restricted to the lament genre."⁴⁰ This points towards a general connection between the two cultures, not limited to the genre. Hillers too seems not to support the idea of a direct connection.

Dobbs-Allsopp takes the idea of a connection much further by positing that the genre of lamentations was already known in Israel two centuries before the destruction of Jerusalem, arguing for an already existing Israelite tradition of City Laments, and therefore shortens the distance in time between the two lament traditions.⁴¹ This idea is not widely accepted.

According to Samet, a comparison to more recent Mesopotamian texts closer in date to the Biblical Book of Lamentations – the aforementioned 'communal laments' or Cultic Laments – points out they have more in common with the Biblical thought patterns than the older Neo-Sumerian texts,⁴² and may have had more influence on the Book of Lamentations.

LITERARY COMPARISON

There are obvious differences between the style of the poetic writing in the Biblical Book of Lamentations and the Sumerian Laments. Most prominently, the Book of Lamentations is written in acrostics, whereas the

Sumerian Laments are clearly not. This is a very superficial stylistic difference, since the methods of writing - alphabetically versus syllabically - demand a different outlook on poetic writing when it comes to its spelling. However, there are many stylistic similarities.

Samet⁴³ points out three textual metaphoric similarities between the Book of Lamentations and the Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur. The first concerns a reference to music when describing the effects of the devastation. In Lamentations 5:14, *the old men are gone from the gate, the young men from their music*. In the Ur Lament (356) ‘they are no longer playing for you the šem and ala drums that gladden the heart, nor the tigi.’ Secondly, ceramic pots are used metaphorically for dying people. In Lamentations 4:2, *the precious children of Zion; once valued as gold – Alas, they are accounted as earthen pots, work of a potter’s hands!* In the Ur Lament (211) ‘its people littered its sides like potsherds.’ The third example given is a more famous one, concerning the fox wandering through the ruins of the city. In Lamentations 5:17, *because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate; foxes walk over it*. In the Ur Lament (269) ‘in the rivers of my city, dust has gathered, foxholes are made therein.’

There are additional textual resemblances between the other Sumerian Laments and the Book of Lamentations. An example pointed out by Hillers is the similarity between the Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur (399-401) ‘Ur – inside it there is death, outside it there is death, inside it we are being finished off by famine, outside it we are being finished off by Elamite weapons,’ and Lamentations 1:20, *Outside the sword killed my children; inside, it was famine*.⁴⁴ He adds that this phrasing is found in other books of the Bible as well. For example, Ezekiel 7:15, *The sword outside, and pestilence and famine inside; he who is in the field shall die by the sword, and he who is in the city – famine and pestilence shall devour him*; Jeremiah 14:18, *If I go out to the field, there are those slain by the sword, and if I go into the city, there are the diseases of famine*; and Deuteronomy 32:25, *In the street the sword will make them childless; in their homes terror will reign*. According to Hillers, these examples “are meant to illustrate the persistence of ancient literary motifs into late biblical literature, and not to prove a specific connection of Lamentations to Sumerian Laments.”⁴⁵

Both the Book of Lamentations and the Sumerian City Laments are trying to portray suffering in a way that affects all sociological levels of society. Berlin points out that both literary works list the different elements of the population. The Lamentation over Sumer and Ur describes different members of a family suffering.⁴⁶ She compares this to the Book of Lamentations 2:21, *Lying on the ground in the streets are young and old. My maidens and youths have fallen by the sword.*⁴⁷

Regardless of a historical connection, direct or not, Sumerian Laments and the Biblical Book of Lamentations clearly share similar motifs, images and themes. These similarities show that there were common ways of describing war and destruction in the ancient Near East in literary texts.⁴⁸

THEOLOGICAL COMPARISON

On a theological level, the Mesopotamian and the Biblical way of considering the destruction of their cities have certain aspects in common. For example, the destruction is not just a physical type of suffering, but a metaphysical suffering as well. In both cases, it is not just the people that are physically suffering, and the structure of society that has been damaged beyond repair, but the temples have been destroyed and the respective god has left the city. This leads to a spiritual despair on top of the physical suffering. The temple is the main access point to the deity of the people, and the destruction of the temple means being cut off from heavenly communication. This calls for mourning on a national and theological level.⁴⁹

There are also significant contrasts on a theological level. An important factor in the Ur Lament is the so called ‘Cosmological Imagery’, whereby the physical destruction on a deeper level refers to the destruction of the mythological infrastructure, involving abnormal climatic phenomena. The Book of Lamentations is rather different, and mainly interested in the ‘Realistic Depiction’ of the destruction, not in a cosmic realm. This includes more realistic natural phenomena as opposed to the supernatural level of climatic destruction in the Ur Lament.⁵⁰

Furthermore, due to the polytheistic nature of Mesopotamian religion as opposed to the monotheistic religion of Israel, the difference in theology is obvious in both Laments. In the Ur Lament, the patron gods of the respective cities have to follow the decisions of the great assembly of the gods and its

chief, Enlil.⁵¹ The pleas from patron deities before the divine council to avert the destruction of their respective cities decreed by the great gods are always rejected. The idea of different levels of divinity allowed for a division of divine attributes, emotions and lack of power, and for different parts of the plot in the Ur Lament to be ascribed to these different gods. In a monotheistic literary text in the same genre, this motif is impossible to use. This means that the aforementioned aspects have to be united into one divine being, a God who is both destructive and compassionate. In Lamentations, the ultimate blame is placed not on other gods or even the Babylonians, but on the sinful Israelites, *the Lord has afflicted her for her many transgressions* (Lamentations 1:5).

Another contrast is the reason given for the destruction. In the Sumerian City Laments, all the explanations offered for the destruction of the city come down to a sense of determinism, it has been decreed by the gods. In the Book of Lamentations, there is a mechanism of divine retribution in place, and the punishment of destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem is caused by the sins of the nation. Logically, repenting for these sins will reverse this punishment, and redemption will follow.⁵² Whereas for the Sumerians the fall of the Ur III dynasty was deterministically justified, and no further explanation was considered necessary, the Davidic Dynasty was supposed to last for eternity and Jerusalem would be its eternal capital, making the destruction of Jerusalem harder for the Judeans to accept and justify.⁵³ In both cases though, the Laments don't seem to focus much on the question of why the suffering happened, but rather focus on the fact that it happened, each with their own theological explanation.

Another difference pointed out by Berlin is the fact that the Sumerians did not have to deal with an exile. There may have been dispersions of war refugees and prisoners of war, but this is less traumatic for a people than a large scale exile and also less influential on a theological level. There is more abandonment in Lamentations than there is in the Sumerian Laments, since in the latter there is the promise of return and rebuilding.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

Several similarities between Sumerian Laments and the book of Lamentations have been discussed above. The question still remains if these similarities indicate a form of connection. It is difficult to deny any connection at all, yet currently impossible to prove a direct one.

The Al-Yahudu archive brings a physical connection between the Judeans and Mesopotamian literature closer, giving an opportunity for the writer of the Biblical Book of Lamentations to get acquainted with the Sumerian Laments. Even though there is no definitive evidence that the Sumerian City Laments had reached the Israelites at the time before the composition of the Book of Lamentations, it can be argued that there were common cultural grounds or influences when it came to general lamenting traditions, pointing towards indirect influence.

NOTES

1. N. Samet, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2014) p. 14.
2. Samet 2014, p. 8.
3. For a complete study of the cultic setting of these prayers see U. Gabbay, *Pacifying the Hearts of the Gods: Sumerian Emesal Prayers of the First Millennium BC* (Heidelberger Emesal-Studien 1, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014).
4. Samet 2014, p. 12.
5. By Th. Jacobsen, "Review of Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur by Samuel Noah Kramer", *ASJL* 58 (1941). An example given in Samet 2014, p. 5 discusses the references in the Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur to the last king of the Ur III empire (Ibbi-Sin), who helped confirm that Ur was indeed the defeated city this lament and the Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur were referring to.
6. Samet 2014, p. 5-8.
7. W.C. Gwaltney Jr., "The Biblical Book of Lamentations in the Context of Near Eastern Lament Literature", in: W.W. Hallo, J.C. Moyer and L.G. Perdue (eds.), *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1983) p. 196.
8. Samet 2014, p. 14.
9. See Ur Lament, lines 374-377.
10. Samet 2014, p. 28. See Ur Lament lines 378-80.
11. Samet 2014, p. 29. See Ur Lament lines 381-384.
12. Samet 2014, p. 21, Ur Lament line 114: 'They did not grant a reign of distant days' – 'bala-ba-u₄ sud-rá na-ma-ni-in-ġar-re-eš-àm'.
13. Ur Lament, line 211.
14. Ur Lament, lines 212-213.
15. Ur Lament, lines 214-216.
16. Ur Lament, lines 231-235.

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17. Samet 2014, p. 23, respectively 'mur-ša₄', 'a mah è-a-gin₇', 'saġ gaz-ak', 'UR-gu₇', 'ki-en-gi₄ ġiš-búr-ra-a ì-bal-e', 'šu-ur₄', and 'u₄ kalam til-til-e úru-a me bí-ib-ġar'.
18. Samet 2014, p. 24. The indiscriminate killing is also described in *kirugu* 6 in lines 225-228.
19. Samet 2014, p. 30.
20. N. Samet, "Sumerian City Laments and the Book of Lamentations: Toward a Comparative Theological Study", *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Near Eastern Studies* 21 (2012, Hebrew) p. 109.
21. D.R. Hillers, *The Anchor Bible: Lamentations* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972) p. XVIII.
22. According to the JPS Bible.
23. A. Berlin, *Lamentations: A commentary*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) p. 7.
24. Hillers, p. XV-XVI.
25. Berlin, p. 1.
26. Berlin, p. 10.
27. See P. Ferris, *The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, *SBLDS* 127 (1992) p. 9-10.
28. F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible, BibOr 44* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1993) p. 96.
29. Berlin p. 22-26.
30. Samet 2014, p. 1, refers for the Biblical material to Dobbs-Allsopp, and so does Berlin, p. 27.
31. Berlin, p. 27.
32. First made by T.F. McDaniel, "The Alleged Sumerian Influence upon Lamentations", *VT* 18 (1968) p. 207.
33. Hillers, p. XXIX.
34. For the texts in this corpus see L.E. Pearce & C. Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer, CUSAS 18* (COL Press, 2014).
35. Before the Al-Yahudu archive there was the Murašu archive from Nippur, containing some Judean names, but nothing like the extensive documentation provided by the Al-Yahudu archive.
36. Pearce & Wunsch, p. 170-173.
37. By K. Abraham, "An Inheritance Division among Judeans in Babylonia from the Early Persian Period", in M. Lubetski (ed.), *New Seals and Inscriptions, Hebrew, Idumean and Cuneiform, Hebrew Bible Monographs* 8 (2007) p. 206-221.
38. Pearce & Wunsch, p. 173.
39. Ferris, p. 174.
40. Hillers, p. XXX.
41. Dobbs-Allsopp, p. 95-96; 157-163.
42. Samet 2012, p. 109. This bridge in the gap of time between the last Sumerian Lament and the biblical Book of Lamentations was also suggested by W.C. Gwaltney Jr., p. 197, by taking these *eršemma* and *balag* texts from the 1st millennium BCE into account. For example, the *balag*-tradition may have grown from the City Laments as a new form of lament ca. 1900 BCE.
43. Samet 2012, p. 97. The last of the three examples given above is different from the ones given in the original Hebrew article. There the example listed is a comparison between line 306 in the Ur Lament: 'Woe is me! I am one who has gone forth from the city, I am one who can find

no rest', and Lamentations 1:3 *She dwelt among the nations, but found no rest*. I have brought the examples given in the author's simplified and abbreviated English version of the discussion on <http://thetorah.com/sumerian-city-laments-and-the-book-of-lamentations>.

44. See Hillers, p. 14 for his explanation why he translates 'death' as 'famine'. Berlin translates this passage as 'Outside the sword bereaved, inside – death.', see also the notes of Berlin, p. 47. This particular comparison is thus weaker than the others given.

45. Hillers, p. XXX.

46. Lines 12-16: 'That the mother does not seek out her child, that the father does not say, "Oh, my (dear) wife!" That the junior wife does not take joy in (his) embrace, that the young child not grow vigorous on (her) knee, that the wetnurse not sing lullabies.'

47. Berlin, p. 13.

48. Berlin, p. 27-28. She takes the argument even further, emphasizing that these shared motifs are not unique for the lament genre, but are also found in other genres like the curses in Deuteronomy 28 and prophetic warnings, and Assyrian annals and treaty curses.

49. Berlin, p. 16 describes the destruction of the temple as a "permanent and national denial of access to God," being a "religious death," calling for mourning.

50. Samet 2012, p. 107-8.

51. For a comparison on divine abandonment see Dobbs-Allsopp, p. 45-51.

52. Samet 2012, p. 108; Berlin, p. 18.

53. Berlin, p. 29.

54. Berlin, p. 30.