


Shared Motifs, Distinct Functions: Theological Transformation in Ancient Near Eastern Lament Traditions

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ABSTRACT: Current comparative approaches to Mesopotamian city laments and biblical Lamentations face methodological limitations in distinguishing shared literary conventions from distinct theological interpretations. While formal parallels have been identified (Dobbs-Allsopp 1993, Cohen 1988), existing frameworks have not systematically examined how identical motifs serve different theological purposes. This study proposes theological transformation analysis that evaluates functional differences alongside formal similarities. Through comparison of three shared motifs – divine abandonment, communal grief, and restoration vision – this analysis suggests identical literary forms serve distinct functions: ritual appeasement versus covenantal repentance, ceremonial performance versus moral transformation, and cosmic order restoration versus ethical renewal. Rather than direct dependence or independent development, these traditions demonstrate how shared ancient Near Eastern conventions could be transformed through distinct theological frameworks, offering methodological tools for comparative studies.

KEYWORDS: Mesopotamian city laments, Book of Lamentations, theological transformation, comparative methodology, ancient Near Eastern literature

The relationship between Mesopotamian city laments and the biblical Book of Lamentations constitutes a fundamental test case for understanding literary transmission and theological adaptation in ancient Near Eastern comparative studies. This relationship directly impacts how scholars interpret cultural exchange, religious development, and literary transformation across ancient civilisations – processes that shaped literary and theological expression throughout the ancient Near East for over two millennia and continue to influence contemporary approaches to comparative ancient Near Eastern studies.

Current scholarship faces a significant methodological challenge in distinguishing between shared literary conventions and distinct theological interpretations. While pioneering comparative studies have identified important formal parallels,¹ and later comprehensive structural analyses have established essential foundations,² existing frameworks

1 S.N. Kramer, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* (AS 12; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1940); S.N. Kramer, “Sumerian Literature and the Bible,” *Studia biblica et orientali*. III. *Oriens Antiquus* (AnBib 12; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico 1959) 185–204.

2 F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (BibOr 44; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico 1993).

have not systematically examined how identical literary motifs may serve fundamentally different theological purposes within their respective religious systems. Dobbs-Allsopp's influential structural analysis, though exemplary in identifying formal similarities, has not fully explored theological transformation processes,³ while Cohen's comprehensive examination of Mesopotamian traditions, despite its scholarly rigour, might benefit from more systematic comparison with biblical–theological distinctiveness.⁴ Recent methodological innovations in biblical studies suggest growing recognition of this analytical gap.⁵

The study addresses this methodological opportunity by proposing theological transformation analysis as a systematic framework for evaluating how identical literary motifs function within different theological systems. Rather than choosing between direct literary influence or complete independent development, this approach examines functional divergence alongside formal similarities. The analysis suggests that functional analysis – examining how shared motifs serve distinct theological purposes – provides crucial methodological insights for understanding relationships between ancient Near Eastern literary traditions while contributing to broader comparative methodologies.⁶

Through a systematic examination of three major shared motifs, this study proposes that identical literary forms serve fundamentally distinct theological functions: ritual appeasement versus covenantal repentance (divine abandonment), ceremonial performance versus moral transformation (communal grief), and cosmic order restoration versus ethical renewal (restoration vision). These findings suggest a methodological framework that may help resolve apparent contradictions between formal similarities and theological distinctiveness while providing analytical tools for comparative ancient Near Eastern literary studies.

To develop this argument, the study (1) establishes methodological criteria for theological transformation analysis; (2) applies this framework to examine divine abandonment, communal grief, and restoration motifs through systematic functional comparison; (3) demonstrates how theological frameworks transform shared literary conventions into distinct religious expressions; (4) explores methodological implications for broader ancient Near Eastern comparative studies.

3 Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 25–28, 162–167.

4 M.E. Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Potomac, MD: Capital Decisions 1988) I, 299–303.

5 C. Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations* (Se-meiaSt 58; Atlanta, GA: SBL 2007); G. Hens-Piazza, *Lamentations* (Wisdom Commentary 30; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 2017).

6 A. Annus (ed.), *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World* (OIS 6; Chicago, IL: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago 2010); M. Nissinen – R.K. Ritner – C.L. Seow, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (WAW 12; Atlanta, GA: SBL 2003).

1. *Status Quaestionis*: Previous Approaches to the Problem

The relationship between Mesopotamian city laments and biblical Lamentations has generated four distinct scholarly approaches over the past eight decades, each offering valuable insights while facing specific methodological limitations. A systematic review of these approaches reveals both the progression of comparative methodology and the need for alternative analytical frameworks.

1.1. Direct Literary Dependence Model (Kramer 1940–1969)

Samuel Noah Kramer pioneered comparative analysis between Sumerian city laments and biblical Lamentations, arguing for direct literary influence based on striking thematic and structural parallels.⁷ His groundbreaking study of *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* demonstrated remarkable similarities in motifs such as divine abandonment, personified cities, and restoration appeals.⁸ Kramer's approach emphasised chronological priority, suggesting that Mesopotamian traditions provided direct literary models for biblical authors, particularly during the Babylonian exile period when cultural contact was extensive.⁹

While Kramer's work established the foundation for comparative studies, subsequent scholarship has identified significant limitations in the direct dependence model. The chronological gap of over 1,500 years between early Sumerian laments and biblical Lamentations complicates claims of direct transmission, while theological differences suggest more complex relationships than simple borrowing.¹⁰

1.2. Shared Cultural Framework Model (Dobbs-Allsopp 1993)

Frederick Dobbs-Allsopp's influential analysis shifted scholarly focus from direct dependence to shared ancient Near Eastern literary conventions.¹¹ His comprehensive structural analysis demonstrated that both traditions employ common generic features: acrostic patterns, personification devices, and formulaic expressions that appear across multiple ancient Near Eastern cultures.¹² Dobbs-Allsopp argued that formal similarities reflect widespread regional mourning conventions rather than specific textual relationships.

This approach successfully addresses chronological problems inherent in direct influence models while providing sophisticated literary analysis. However, Dobbs-Allsopp's framework has not systematically examined how shared conventions may serve different theological purposes within distinct religious systems, focusing primarily on formal rather than functional analysis.

⁷ Kramer, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*, 32–35.

⁸ Kramer, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*, 89–93; Kramer, "Sumerian Literature and the Bible," 185–204.

⁹ S.N. Kramer, "Lamentation over the Destruction of Nippur: A Preliminary Report," *ErIsr* 9 (1969) 89–93.

¹⁰ T.F. McDaniel, "The Alleged Sumerian Influence Upon Lamentations," *VT* 18/2 (1968) 198–209.

¹¹ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 25–28.

¹² Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 162–167.

1.3. Independent Mesopotamian Analysis (Cohen 1988)

Mark Cohen's comprehensive examination of Mesopotamian lamentation traditions established definitive textual foundations for comparative study through rigorous philological analysis.¹³ His systematic cataloguing of Sumerian and Akkadian lament texts provides essential source material while demonstrating the complexity and sophistication of Mesopotamian mourning literature.¹⁴ Cohen's work emphasises the internal development and function of Mesopotamian traditions within their own cultural contexts.

While Cohen's philological rigour remains exemplary, his analysis focuses primarily on Mesopotamian traditions without extensive comparison to biblical materials. This approach, though methodologically sound, has not adequately addressed questions of cross-cultural literary relationships that motivated earlier comparative studies.

1.4. Cultural Transmission Model (Petter 2011)

Donna Petter's recent analysis proposes 'influence through cultural exposure' as an alternative to both direct dependence and complete independence. Her examination of intertextual dynamics suggests that biblical authors may have encountered Mesopotamian traditions through cultural contact without direct textual borrowing.¹⁵ This model accommodates both formal similarities and theological differences by emphasising adaptive processes rather than simple transmission.

Petter's approach offers methodological sophistication in addressing complex transmission patterns. However, her framework has not provided systematic criteria for distinguishing between various types of cultural influence or for evaluating how theological frameworks may transform shared literary materials.

1.5. Methodological Assessment and Research Gap

These four approaches have established essential foundations for comparative study while revealing a consistent methodological limitation: the absence of systematic frameworks for analysing how identical literary motifs may serve fundamentally different theological functions. While Kramer demonstrated significant parallels, Dobbs-Allsopp identified shared conventions, Cohen provided textual foundations, and Petter explored transmission mechanisms, none has adequately addressed the functional transformation of shared literary materials within distinct religious systems.

Recent methodological innovations in biblical studies suggest growing recognition of this analytical gap.¹⁶ Contemporary comparative approaches in ancient Near Eastern studies indicate similar awareness of the need for frameworks that can accommodate both

13 Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations*.

14 Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations*, I, 156–159.

15 D.L. Petter, *The Book of Ezekiel and Mesopotamian City Laments* (OBO 246; Fribourg – Göttingen: Academic Press – Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2011) 145–162.

16 Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets*; Hens-Piazza, *Lamentations*.

formal similarities and functional differences.¹⁷ This scholarly context suggests that systematic theological transformation analysis may provide useful tools for advancing beyond current methodological limitations while building upon established foundations.

The present study addresses this methodological opportunity by proposing analytical criteria for examining how shared literary motifs function within different theological systems, potentially offering a framework that accommodates insights from all four previous approaches while providing new analytical precision.

2. Methodological Framework for Theological Transformation Analysis

The methodological limitations identified in previous approaches suggest the need for analytical frameworks that can systematically examine how identical literary motifs function within different theological systems. This study proposes theological transformation analysis as a method for evaluating functional differences alongside formal similarities in ancient Near Eastern comparative studies.

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

Theological transformation analysis operates on the premise that shared literary conventions may serve fundamentally different purposes when integrated into distinct religious frameworks. Rather than treating formal similarities as evidence for either direct influence or complete independence, this approach examines how theological systems transform inherited or parallel literary materials to serve specific religious functions.¹⁸ This methodology builds upon recent advances in comparative ancient Near Eastern studies while addressing gaps in functional analysis identified in biblical and Mesopotamian scholarship.¹⁹

2.2. Analytical Framework

The framework employs four systematic criteria for distinguishing theological transformation from simple literary borrowing or coincidental similarity.

Criterion 1. Functional Divergence: Do identical literary motifs serve fundamentally different purposes within their respective contexts? This criterion examines whether shared forms operate as ritual performance, moral instruction, theological reflection, or other distinct functions.

¹⁷ Annus (ed.), *Divination and Interpretation*; Nissinen – Ritner – Seow, *Prophets and Prophecy*.

¹⁸ Recent methodological discussions in biblical studies have emphasised the need for frameworks that can accommodate both formal similarities and functional differences; see H.A. Thomas, *Poetry and Theology in the Book of Lamentations: The Aesthetics of an Open Text* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 47; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press 2013) 25–30.

¹⁹ M.J. Bier, 'Perhaps There Is Hope': *Reading Lamentations as a Polyphony of Pain, Penitence, and Protest* (LHBOTS 603; London: Bloomsbury – Clark 2015); S. Kipfer, "Contextualizing 'Sadness' and 'Grief' in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel," *HBAI* 13/2 (2024) 281–308; X.H.T. Pham, *Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 302; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999).

Criterion 2. Systematic Consistency: Do functional differences align consistently with broader theological frameworks rather than appearing as random variations? This criterion evaluates whether divergent functions reflect coherent religious systems rather than isolated textual peculiarities.

Criterion 3. Interpretive Integration: Are shared motifs reinterpreted through distinctive theological vocabularies, concepts, and explanatory frameworks? This criterion examines how traditions employ specific religious language to transform common literary materials.

Criterion 4. Contextual Adaptation: Do functional differences reflect systematic adaptation to distinct cultural–religious contexts that necessitated or strongly directed specific transformations? This criterion examines whether observed differences result from contextual pressures that made certain adaptations functionally necessary rather than representing simple variation within the same system. It evaluates the causal relationship between specific contextual factors and particular transformative patterns.

2.3. Application of the Method

This study applies theological transformation analysis to three major shared motifs between Mesopotamian city laments and biblical Lamentations: divine abandonment, communal grief, and restoration vision. Each case study examines both formal similarities and functional differences, applying the four criteria systematically to evaluate whether observed differences represent theological transformation.²⁰

The analysis focuses on primary textual evidence from representative Mesopotamian laments (*The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*, *The Lamentation over Sumer and Ur*) and biblical Lamentations, examining how identical literary forms serve distinct theological purposes within their respective religious systems. Rather than seeking to establish direct influence or independence, this approach investigates how shared ancient Near Eastern mourning conventions may be transformed through different theological frameworks.²¹

2.4. Addressing Potential Counterarguments

The theological transformation analysis framework must acknowledge potential limitations and alternative interpretations. Three primary counterarguments merit explicit consideration:

- (1) The Spectrum Argument might suggest that functional differences represent variations within a broader ancient Near Eastern theological spectrum rather than radical transformations. However, the systematic consistency of functional differences across multiple motifs suggests coherent theological systems rather than arbitrary emphases.

20 This methodological approach builds upon comparative frameworks developed in Annus (ed.), *Divination and Interpretation*.

21 For theoretical foundations of comparative ancient Near Eastern literary analysis, see Nissinen – Ritner – Seow, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 1–15.

The interpretive integration evident in distinctive vocabularies – ‘word of An and Enlil’ versus ‘righteous judgment of Yahweh’ – demonstrates active reinterpretation rather than passive inheritance.²² The contextual adaptation to distinct frameworks (temple-based ritual systems versus community-based, covenantal structures) reflects systematic transformation rather than superficial variation.

- (2) The Multifunctionality Challenge argues that clear functional distinctions oversimplify motifs serving multiple functions within single traditions. This highlights important methodological limitations requiring a nuanced response. The framework focuses on predominant functions rather than exhaustive cataloguing. While Mesopotamian laments occasionally include moral elements, the systematic emphasis on ritual appeasement represents the characteristic function. Similarly, while biblical Lamentations includes ritual elements, the consistent emphasis on covenantal justice indicates a primary theological purpose.²³ The four criteria, applied collectively, distinguish between primary transformative functions and secondary variations.
- (3) The Gradual Development Argument proposes that differences result from internal evolution rather than a transformative adaptation of shared materials. While acknowledging the role of internal development, the transformation framework addresses how traditions have adapted shared conventions to serve distinct purposes. Formal similarities suggest common heritage, while functional differences indicate systematic adaptation.²⁴ The consistent transformation pattern – from ritual appeasement to covenantal repentance, ceremonial performance to moral instruction, cosmic order to ethical renewal – indicates purposeful theological reinterpretation rather than coincidental development.

These counterarguments illuminate cultural transmission complexity while supporting the framework’s systematic approach to examining literary relationships in the ancient Near East.

3. Case Study 1: Divine Abandonment – Shared Motif, Distinct Functions

The first application of theological transformation analysis examines divine abandonment motifs, representing one of the most striking parallels between Mesopotamian city laments and biblical Lamentations. While both traditions employ virtually identical literary

²² This interpretive integration is particularly evident in the consistent use of covenant terminology in biblical contexts and ritual terminology in Mesopotamian contexts when discussing formally similar motifs.

²³ For discussion of primary versus secondary functions in biblical literature, see Thomas, *Poetry and Theology*, 45–52.

²⁴ The concept of transformative adaptation builds upon insights from cultural transmission theory; see D.M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2014) 89–95.

imagery – a patron deity physically departing from the city, resulting in urban destruction – systematic, functional analysis suggests fundamentally different theological purposes underlying this shared motif.

3.1. The Shared Motif: Divine Departure and Urban Destruction

Both Mesopotamian and biblical traditions structure their lament narratives around divine abandonment as the primary explanatory framework for urban catastrophe. In *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*, the moon god Nanna is depicted as physically departing his temple, leaving the city defenceless against invaders.²⁵ The text presents this abandonment through vivid, spatial imagery: ‘Nanna has abandoned his house, left his city’ and ‘The god has gone out from his city, has left his land desolate.’²⁶ This departure directly precipitates the city’s destruction, establishing clear causation between divine absence and urban vulnerability.

Biblical Lamentations employs remarkably similar imagery and causal structure. Lamentations 2:7 states that ‘The Lord has rejected His altar, He has abandoned His sanctuary,’ while 2:1 describes how ‘the Lord has covered Daughter Zion with the cloud of his anger’ and ‘hurled down the splendor of Israel from heaven to earth.’²⁷ Like the Mesopotamian texts, the biblical tradition presents divine departure as both spatial (abandonment of sanctuary) and causal (resulting in destruction). This shared motif extends to common literary devices: both traditions personify cities as grieving figures, employ storm metaphors for destruction, and structure their narratives around the absence–presence dynamic of divine–human relations.

3.2. Functional Divergence: Mysterious Divine Will Versus Covenantal Justice

Despite these remarkable formal similarities, theological transformation analysis reveals that identical motifs serve fundamentally different functions within their respective religious systems. The key divergence lies in how each tradition interprets divine abandonment and prescribes appropriate human response.

3.2.1. Mesopotamian Function: Mysterious Divine Will

Mesopotamian city laments consistently present divine abandonment as an inscrutable decree beyond human comprehension or influence. ‘The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur’ describes the catastrophe as ‘the word of An and Enlil,’ a divine decision requiring no explanation and admitting no moral interpretation.²⁸ When Nanna abandons Ur, the text focuses on the inexorable nature of divine will rather than any human transgression that might have prompted the departure. The goddess Ningal’s lament emphasises the

25 Kramer, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*, 89–93.

26 Kramer, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*, 96–101.

27 A. Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2002) 78–85.

28 P. Michalowski, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur* (MC 1; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 1989) 67–71.

mysterious character of divine decision-making: the gods have decreed destruction according to their own unfathomable wisdom.²⁹

This understanding shapes the prescribed human response. Since divine abandonment represents sovereign will rather than moral judgement, the appropriate response becomes ritual appeasement rather than ethical transformation. Mesopotamian laments consistently conclude with appeals for divine return through proper, ceremonial means: restored offerings, rebuilt temples, and correctly performed rituals.³⁰

3.2.2. Biblical Function: Covenantal Justice

Biblical Lamentations operates within a fundamentally different theological framework where divine abandonment represents covenantal justice rather than a mysterious decree. The text repeatedly connects Jerusalem's destruction to specific covenant violations: 'Jerusalem has greatly sinned and so has become unclean' (Lam 1:8) and 'The Lord is righteous, for I rebelled against his command' (Lam 1:18).³¹ Unlike Mesopotamian traditions, which present divine action as beyond moral evaluation, Lamentations explicitly frames abandonment as a divine response to human behaviour within the covenant relationship.

This covenantal framework transforms the prescribed human response. Rather than ritual appeasement, Lamentations emphasises moral transformation and genuine repentance. The text's central theological question – 'Why should the living complain when punished for their sins?' (Lam 3:39) – articulates a perspective where divine judgement serves moral pedagogy rather than expressing inscrutable will.³²

3.3. Application of Methodological Criteria

The divine abandonment motif indicates all four criteria for theological transformation.

Criterion 1. Functional Divergence: Identical imagery serves distinct purposes – mysterious, divine sovereignty (Mesopotamian) versus covenantal justice (biblical).

Criterion 2. Systematic Consistency: These functional differences align consistently with broader theological frameworks – polytheistic divine autonomy versus monotheistic covenant theology.

Criterion 3. Interpretive Integration: Each tradition reinterprets shared motifs through distinctive religious vocabularies – 'word of An and Enlil' versus 'righteous judgement of Yahweh'.

Criterion 4. Contextual Adaptation: The functional differences directly result from specific contextual pressures that necessitate distinct interpretive approaches. Mesopotamian temple-based religious systems required explanations that preserved divine sovereignty while maintaining ritual efficacy – mysterious divine will accomplished both goals by protecting divine prerogatives while providing clear ritual responses. Biblical, covenant-based

²⁹ Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations*, I, 175–179.

³⁰ Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations*, I, 210–214.

³¹ Berlin, *Lamentations*, 132–136.

³² Thomas, *Poetry and Theology*, 156–158.

community systems required explanations that maintained divine justice while preserving hope for restoration – covenantal interpretation accomplished this by linking suffering to specific violations while ensuring restoration remained possible through repentance. These contextual requirements drove the specific transformations observed rather than merely providing different settings for similar functions.

This analysis suggests that divine abandonment motifs represent theological transformation rather than simple literary borrowing or independent development. Both traditions engage the same fundamental human experience – urban destruction and divine absence – but interpret this experience through fundamentally different theological lenses. The divine abandonment case study demonstrates how theological transformation analysis reveals functional differences beneath formal similarities, supporting the main argument that shared motifs serve distinct theological functions in ancient Near Eastern literary traditions.

4. Case Study 2: Communal Grief – Shared Motif, Distinct Functions

The second application of theological transformation analysis examines communal grief motifs, particularly the personification of destroyed cities as weeping women. This shared literary device appears prominently in both Mesopotamian city laments and biblical Lamentations, employing virtually identical imagery and emotional registers. However, systematic functional analysis suggests that these formally parallel expressions of grief serve fundamentally different purposes within their respective theological frameworks.

4.1. The Shared Motif: Cities as Weeping Women

Both traditions employ the powerful literary device of personifying destroyed cities as grieving women, creating emotional immediacy through feminine imagery of loss and abandonment. In Mesopotamian laments, the goddess Ningal serves as the primary mourning figure for Ur, depicted in deeply human terms of maternal grief and spousal abandonment.³³ *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* presents Ningal weeping for her city with language that parallels human bereavement: ‘The woman cries “Alas for my city!” cries “Alas for my house!”’ and describes her ‘bitter weeping’ as she surveys the destruction.³⁴

Biblical Lamentations employs strikingly similar imagery through the personification of Jerusalem as a widow and mother in mourning. Lamentations 1:1 opens with the iconic image: ‘How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she who was great among the nations!’ The text develops this personification through chapters 1–2, presenting Jerusalem as speaking in first person, lamenting her children’s fate, and appealing for divine mercy.³⁵ Both traditions employ parallel emotional

³³ Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations*, I, 175–179.

³⁴ Kramer, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*, 96–101.

³⁵ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 147–150.

vocabulary (weeping, crying, lamenting), similar maternal imagery (concern for inhabitants as children), and comparable spatial metaphors (sitting alone, abandoned spaces).

4.2. Functional Divergence: Ritual Performance Versus Moral Transformation

Despite these remarkable formal parallels, the weeping woman motif serves distinctly different functions within each theological system, reflecting broader differences in how each tradition understands the purpose and efficacy of communal mourning.

4.2.1. Mesopotamian Function: Ritual Performance and Divine Appeasement

In Mesopotamian traditions, the weeping woman motif functions primarily as a ritual performance designed to influence divine emotion and secure divine return. Ningal's lament is a model for proper mourning behaviour, demonstrating correct ritual responses to divine abandonment.³⁶ The goddess's weeping is presented as an efficacious action that may move the gods to compassion rather than merely expressing an emotional response to loss. The text emphasises the performative aspects of her grief: proper gestures, appropriate verbal formulae, and correct ceremonial behaviour.³⁷

This ritual function is reinforced by the structured, repetitive nature of Mesopotamian laments, which suggest liturgical use in temple ceremonies aimed at restoration. The emphasis falls on the proper performance of grief as a means of divine persuasion rather than on moral reflection or ethical transformation. Ningal's mourning demonstrates both the magnitude of loss and the correct ritual response that might secure divine favour for urban reconstruction.

4.2.2. Biblical Function: Moral Reflection and Covenantal Repentance

Biblical Lamentations transforms the weeping woman motif into a vehicle for moral reflection and covenantal repentance. Jerusalem's grief serves not primarily as a ritual performance but as an acknowledgement of guilt and an appeal for justice within the covenant relationship.³⁸ The personified city repeatedly confesses transgression: 'I called to my lovers but they deceived me' (Lam 1:19) and 'The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word' (Lam 1:18). This confessional dimension distinguishes biblical from Mesopotamian usage of the motif.

Furthermore, Jerusalem's lament functions as moral instruction for the community, demonstrating proper response to divine judgement through acknowledgement of guilt and appeal for mercy based on covenant faithfulness rather than ritual correctness.³⁹ The weeping woman becomes a theological teacher, modelling repentance and covenant renewal rather than ceremonial appeasement. This pedagogical function extends the motif beyond ritual performance into ethical formation and community instruction.

³⁶ Michalowski, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur*, 13.

³⁷ Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations*, I, 188–191.

³⁸ Berlin, *Lamentations*, 78–85.

³⁹ J. Middlemas, "War, Comfort, and Compassion in Lamentations," *ExpTim* 130/8 (2019) 351–352.

4.3. Application of Methodological Criteria

The communal grief motif indicates theological transformation through all four criteria.

Criterion 1. Functional Divergence: Identical imagery serves distinct purposes – ritual appeasement and divine persuasion (Mesopotamian) versus moral instruction and covenantal repentance (biblical).

Criterion 2. Systematic Consistency: These functional differences align with broader theological systems – emphasis on proper ritual performance versus emphasis on ethical transformation and covenant fidelity.

Criterion 3. Interpretive Integration: Each tradition employs distinctive theological vocabularies – the language of divine emotion and ritual efficacy versus the language of sin, guilt, and covenant justice.

Criterion 4. Contextual Adaptation: The functional differences stem from specific institutional requirements demanding distinct communal mourning approaches. Mesopotamian temple-centred religious systems required mourning practices that could effectively influence divine emotion and secure divine return – ritual performance served this institutional need by providing concrete actions believed to move divine hearts. Biblical, community-centred, covenantal systems required mourning practices that could facilitate ethical transformation and community instruction – moral reflection and repentance served this institutional need by addressing the behavioural changes necessary for covenant renewal. These distinct institutional pressures necessitated the specific functional adaptations observed.

This analysis indicates that the weeping woman motif represents a clear case of theological transformation rather than simple borrowing or independent development. Both traditions recognise the power of feminine grief imagery for processing urban destruction, but each adapts this shared convention to serve distinct religious purposes.⁴⁰ The communal grief case study further demonstrates how theological transformation analysis reveals functional differences beneath formal similarities, supporting the broader argument that shared motifs serve distinct theological functions in ancient Near Eastern literary traditions.

5. Case Study 3: Restoration Vision – Shared Motif, Distinct Functions

The third application of theological transformation analysis examines restoration vision motifs, representing the culminating element in both Mesopotamian city laments and biblical Lamentations. Both traditions conclude their mourning literature with appeals for divine return and urban renewal, employing parallel imagery of reconstruction, renewed divine presence, and restored prosperity. However, systematic functional analysis

⁴⁰ Bier, "Perhaps There Is Hope," 98–102.

reveals that these formally similar restoration visions serve fundamentally different theological purposes and envision distinct pathways to recovery.

5.1. The Shared Motif: Appeals for Divine Return and Urban Renewal

Both traditions structure their restoration appeals around the fundamental hope that mourning and supplication may secure divine return and consequent urban renewal. Mesopotamian laments consistently conclude with direct petitions for the gods to re-establish their presence in restored temples and cities. *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* ends with appeals for Nanna's return: 'May the god dwelling in the city be restored' and 'May Nanna return to his beloved dwelling.'⁴¹ These appeals envision physical reconstruction, renewed offerings, and re-established divine-human relations through proper temple worship.⁴²

Biblical Lamentations employs remarkably similar structural patterns and imagery in its restoration appeals. The text repeatedly calls for divine remembrance and return: 'Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us' (Lam 5:1) and 'Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old' (Lam 5:21).⁴³ Like Mesopotamian traditions, the biblical text envisions renewed divine presence, urban reconstruction, and restored prosperity. Both traditions employ a parallel vocabulary of remembrance, return, and renewal while expressing hope that proper appeal may secure divine favour for urban recovery.

5.2. Functional Divergence: Cosmic Order Restoration Versus Covenant Renewal

Despite these formal parallels in restoration imagery, the underlying visions serve distinctly different theological functions, reflecting fundamentally different understandings of divine-human relations and the requirements for authentic renewal.

5.2.1. Mesopotamian Function: Cosmic Order through Ritual Restoration

Mesopotamian restoration visions focus primarily on re-establishing cosmic order through proper ritual performance and temple reconstruction. The appeals emphasise the physical restoration of sacred spaces, resumption of correct offerings, and maintenance of proper ceremonial relationships between gods and humans.⁴⁴ 'The Lamentation over Nippur' concludes with detailed descriptions of renewed temple functions, proper sacrificial procedures, and restored priestly activities as the pathway to divine favour and urban prosperity.⁴⁵

This vision reflects a theological understanding where cosmic order depends on maintaining correct ritual relationships with the divine realm. Restoration requires primarily

41 Kramer, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*, 115–118.

42 Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations*, I, 210–214.

43 Berlin, *Lamentations*, 125–128.

44 Michalowski, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur*, 145–148.

45 Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations*, I, 215–218.

ceremonial precision rather than moral transformation: rebuilt temples, properly performed sacrifices, and correctly maintained festivals. The emphasis falls on restoring the physical and ritual infrastructure that ensures divine presence and cosmic stability.⁴⁶

5.2.2. Biblical Function: Covenant Renewal through Ethical Transformation

Biblical Lamentations presents a restoration vision within a fundamentally different theological framework, emphasising covenant renewal through ethical transformation. While the text hopes for physical reconstruction, it consistently subordinates material restoration to spiritual and moral renewal. The appeals focus on a restored relationship rather than a restored ritual: ‘Turn us back to you, O Lord, and we will be restored’ (Lam 5:21) emphasises relational transformation rather than ceremonial restoration.⁴⁷

This covenantal framework transforms restoration requirements from ritual precision to ethical fidelity. The biblical restoration vision anticipates moral transformation of the community, a renewed commitment to covenant obligations, and restoration based on divine forgiveness rather than ceremonial appeasement. The text suggests that authentic restoration requires a fundamental change in human behaviour and renewed dedication to covenant faithfulness rather than merely rebuilding physical structures.⁴⁸

5.3. Application of Methodological Criteria

The restoration vision motif suggests theological transformation through all four criteria.

Criterion 1. Functional Divergence: Identical appeals serve distinct purposes – cosmic order restoration through ritual means (Mesopotamian) versus covenant renewal through ethical transformation (biblical).

Criterion 2. Systematic Consistency: These functional differences align with broader theological frameworks – emphasis on ceremonial precision and cosmic stability versus emphasis on moral transformation and covenant fidelity.

Criterion 3. Interpretive Integration: Each tradition employs distinctive theological vocabularies – the language of cosmic order, ritual efficacy, and divine dwelling versus the language of covenant renewal, moral transformation, and relational restoration.

Criterion 4. Contextual Adaptation: The functional differences result from specific societal structures that require distinct pathways to authentic renewal. Mesopotamian city–state systems, dependent on the stable temple–divine relationships for political legitimacy and economic prosperity, necessitated restoration approaches focused on re-establishing proper ritual relationships – cosmic order restoration served this structural requirement by ensuring divine favour for urban stability. Biblical tribal–covenant systems, organised around collective moral obligations and divine law, required restoration

46 A. Winitzer, *Early Mesopotamian Divination Literature: Its Organizational Framework and Generative and Paradigmatic Characteristics* (AMD 12; Leiden – Boston: Brill 2017) 160–163.

47 Thomas, *Poetry and Theology*, 178–182.

48 Bier, “*Perhaps There Is Hope*,” 130–133.

approaches that addressed communal ethical failures – covenant renewal through ethical transformation served this structural requirement by ensuring community faithfulness, which is necessary for sustained divine relationship. These underlying sociopolitical structures drove the specific restoration visions rather than merely providing different cultural flavours.

The restoration vision analysis suggests that even the most hopeful and forward-looking elements of these lamentation traditions reflect theological transformation rather than simple literary parallelism. Both traditions recognise the human need for divine favour and urban renewal, but each envisions fundamentally different pathways to authentic restoration. This case study completes the analysis, showing that shared motifs consistently serve distinct theological functions across all major elements of the lamentation genre, strongly supporting the theological transformation analysis framework.

6. Implications for Ancient Near Eastern Comparative Studies

The systematic application of theological transformation analysis to three major shared motifs suggests that identical literary forms consistently serve distinct theological functions within Mesopotamian and biblical lamentation traditions. These findings have significant implications for comparative methodology in ancient Near Eastern studies, suggesting new approaches to understanding complex literary relationships while contributing analytical tools for broader comparative research.

6.1. Methodological Contributions to Comparative Analysis

The theological transformation analysis framework addresses persistent methodological challenges in ancient Near Eastern comparative studies by providing systematic criteria for distinguishing between formal similarities and functional differences. Traditional approaches have often faced binary choices between direct influence and complete independence, but the evidence from lamentation traditions suggests more nuanced relationships.⁴⁹ The four-criteria framework demonstrated in this study offers analytical tools that may accommodate both shared literary conventions and distinct religious interpretations across various ancient Near Eastern literary genres.

This methodological contribution extends beyond lamentation literature to broader questions of cultural transmission and literary adaptation in the ancient Near East. Recent comparative studies have increasingly recognised the need for frameworks to evaluate how shared cultural materials undergo transformation within different religious and social

⁴⁹ Recent discussions of methodological challenges in ancient Near Eastern comparative studies include S.L. Sanders, *From Adapa to Enoch: Scribal Culture and Religious Vision in Judea and Babylonia* (TSAJ 167; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2017) 195–198.

contexts.⁵⁰ The systematic criteria developed here – functional divergence, systematic consistency, interpretive integration, and contextual adaptation – provide replicable analytical tools for examining similar phenomena across diverse ancient Near Eastern literary traditions.

6.2. Implications for Understanding Cultural Transmission

The consistent pattern of theological transformation observed across all three case studies suggests that ancient Near Eastern literary traditions engaged in sophisticated processes of cultural adaptation rather than simple borrowing or independent development. Both Mesopotamian city laments and biblical Lamentations demonstrate remarkable creativity in transforming shared mourning conventions to serve distinct theological purposes while maintaining formal recognition of common literary heritage.⁵¹

This evidence contributes to current discussions about cultural transmission mechanisms in the ancient Near East by suggesting that literary adaptation involved theological interpretation rather than mere formal imitation. The systematic nature of functional differences observed in this study indicates deliberate adaptation processes rather than random variation. This suggests that ancient authors had a sophisticated understanding of how literary forms could be transformed to serve different religious purposes.⁵²

6.3. Broader Applications to Ancient Near Eastern Literature

The theological transformation analysis framework developed for lamentation traditions may prove applicable to other ancient Near Eastern literary genres that exhibit similar patterns of formal similarity and functional difference. Wisdom literature, hymnic traditions, and prophetic literature all demonstrate comparable phenomena where shared literary conventions serve distinct purposes within different cultural contexts.⁵³ The systematic criteria established in this study provide methodological tools for examining these broader literary relationships while avoiding oversimplified models of direct influence or complete independence.

Furthermore, this approach contributes to ongoing discussions about the relationship between literary form and theological content in ancient Near Eastern studies. The evidence from lamentation traditions demonstrates that identical literary forms can serve as vehicles for fundamentally different theological expressions, suggesting that formal analysis alone provides an insufficient basis for understanding ancient religious literature.

50 For contemporary approaches to cultural transmission in ancient Near Eastern studies, see Annus (ed.), *Divination and Interpretation*, 15–25.

51 Carr provides valuable analysis of how ancient communities transformed cultural materials (*Holy Resilience*, 156–162).

52 This evidence aligns with broader discussions of deliberate literary adaptation in ancient Near Eastern traditions; see Nissinen – Ritner – Seow, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 8–15.

53 For parallel phenomena in other ancient Near Eastern literary genres, see P.W. Ferris, *The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (SBLDS 127; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1992) 147–152.

Functional analysis emerges as an essential complement to structural and thematic comparison in comparative ancient Near Eastern studies.⁵⁴

6.4. Future Research Directions

The success of theological transformation analysis in illuminating relationships between Mesopotamian and biblical lamentation traditions suggests several productive directions for future comparative research. First, a similar analysis could be applied to other shared literary genres to determine whether theological transformation represents a widespread phenomenon in ancient Near Eastern literary relationships or remains specific to lamentation literature.

Second, the framework could be extended to examine relationships between other ancient Near Eastern literary traditions, including Egyptian, Ugaritic, and Hittite materials, to assess whether similar patterns of formal similarity and functional difference appear across broader cultural boundaries. Such research would help determine whether theological transformation analysis provides useful tools for understanding literary relationships throughout the ancient Near East.

Third, the systematic criteria developed here could be refined and expanded through application to additional case studies, potentially creating more sophisticated analytical frameworks for comparative ancient Near Eastern studies. The four criteria demonstrated in this study represent initial tools that may benefit from further testing and development through broader application.

The implications of this study extend beyond specific questions about Mesopotamian and biblical lamentation traditions to contribute methodological tools for understanding complex literary relationships throughout ancient Near Eastern comparative studies. The theological transformation analysis framework offers systematic approaches to long-standing methodological challenges while providing new perspectives on cultural transmission and literary adaptation in the ancient world.

Conclusion

This study has suggested that the relationship between Mesopotamian city laments and biblical Lamentations can be understood most productively through theological transformation analysis rather than traditional models of direct influence or complete independence. The systematic examination of three major shared motifs – divine abandonment, communal grief, and restoration vision – reveals a consistent pattern: identical literary forms serve fundamentally distinct theological functions within their respective religious systems.

⁵⁴ The relationship between form and function in ancient Near Eastern literature has been explored in W.C. Bouzard Jr., *We Have Heard with Our Ears, O God: Sources of the Communal Laments in the Psalms* (SBLDS 159; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1997) 189–193.

The evidence indicates that while both traditions employ remarkably similar formal elements, these shared motifs consistently serve different purposes. Mesopotamian laments emphasise ritual appeasement, mysterious divine will, and cosmic order restoration through ceremonial means. Biblical Lamentations transforms these same literary conventions to serve covenantal repentance, moral instruction, and ethical transformation requirements. This pattern suggests sophisticated processes of cultural adaptation rather than simple borrowing or coincidental similarity.⁵⁵

The theological transformation analysis framework developed in this study contributes methodological tools for comparative ancient Near Eastern studies by providing systematic criteria for distinguishing between formal similarities and functional differences. The four-criteria approach – functional divergence, systematic consistency, interpretive integration, and contextual adaptation – offers replicable analytical methods that may prove applicable to other ancient Near Eastern literary relationships exhibiting similar patterns of shared form and distinct function.⁵⁶

These findings have broader implications for understanding cultural transmission and literary adaptation in the ancient Near East. Rather than viewing literary relationships through binary frameworks of influence versus independence, the evidence suggests that ancient traditions engaged in creative processes of theological transformation, adapting shared cultural materials to serve distinct religious purposes while maintaining recognition of common literary heritage. This perspective enriches our understanding of how ancient civilizations processed shared experiences of trauma, loss, and hope through literary expression while developing distinctive theological voices.⁵⁷

The theological transformation analysis approach demonstrated in this study offers a methodological framework that accommodates both the formal similarities that have long intrigued scholars and the theological distinctiveness that has challenged simple influence models. By focusing on functional analysis alongside formal comparison, this approach provides new tools for understanding complex literary relationships throughout ancient Near Eastern comparative studies while contributing to ongoing discussions about cultural transmission, religious adaptation, and literary creativity in the ancient world.

55 This evidence aligns with broader discussions of cultural adaptation in ancient Near Eastern contexts; see Carr, *Holy Resilience*, 204–208.

56 The development of systematic criteria for comparative analysis builds upon methodological advances discussed in Annus (ed.), *Divination and Interpretation*, 234–239.

57 For broader theoretical frameworks regarding trauma and literary expression in ancient contexts, see E. Boase – C.G. Frechette (eds.), *Bible through the Lens of Trauma* (SemeiaSt 86; Atlanta, GA: SBL 2016) 204–208.

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