THE ALLEGED SUMERIAN INFLUENCE UPON LAMENTATIONS

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Sumerian literary catalogues from the early second millennium contain the titles of numerous lamentations over the destruction of Sumerian city-states, including Akkad (Agade), Eridu, Lagash, Nippur, and Ur, and over the whole land of Sumer. Portions of most of these lamentations have been recovered, and parts of several of them have been published in translation, including the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur”, “The Second Lamentation for Ur”, “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Nippur”, and the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Akkad”.


5) This lamentation over Akkad is part of “The Curse of Agade”, a historio-
Within the past decade statements have been made by several scholars concerning the relationship of these Sumerian laments to the biblical Lamentations, claiming that the Hebrew book was influenced by and dependent upon the earlier Sumerian works. S. N. Kramer has stated, without going into detail, “there is little doubt that it was the Sumerian poets who originated and developed the ‘lamentation’ genre... and that the Biblical Book of Lamentations as well as the ‘burden’ laments of the prophets, represented a profoundly moving transformation of the more formal and conventional prototypes” 1). Similarly C. J. Gadd, without detailed discussion, has stated that the biblical Lamentations is “manifestly under the influence” of these Sumerian lamentations. He criticizes Norman Gottwald for not giving, in his Studies in the Book of Lamentations, sufficient recognition to the alien influence upon the origin, themes and theology of the Hebrew lamentation motif. He states, “certainly not all the harps were left hanging by the waters of Babylon, and some were attuned to sing at home the songs of a strange land” 2). Speaking somewhat more emphatically, H.-J. Kraus has stated, “die Klage um das zerstörte Heiligtum von Ur z.B. bietet eine erstaunliche Parallele zu den Threni... Vergleicht man einmal sorgfältig das Klagelied über die Zerstörung von Ur (man könnte auch noch die Klage um die Zerstörung von Akkade hinzunehmen) und die alttestamentlichen Threni, so zeigen sich sowohl im formalen Ansatz wie auch in den Motiven überraschende Parallelen” 3). Kraus follows these statements by briefly citing (usually with text references only) examples of these parallels.

However, not all biblical scholars are in agreement with these views of Sumerian influence upon the Hebrew Lamentations. W. Rudolph, without any discussion, simply states that the parallels...
are not too close and are due simply to a similar experience and situation \(^1\)). Similarly, Otto Eissfeldt opposes any historical connection between the Sumerian lamentations and the biblical Lamentations \(^2\).

In view of these assertions and reservations on the question of Sumerian influence upon the Hebrew Lamentations, a fuller examination of both the evidence and the problems involved merits consideration. In this study the attempt will be made to present and evaluate the parallel motifs appearing in both the Hebrew and Sumerian works, including not only the more probable ones cited by Kraus but other motifs which could possibly suggest literary influence or dependence. A discussion of the problems involved in relating second millenium Sumerian works to sixth century Hebrew poetry, along with some general conclusions, will be given in conclusion. The writer is not a Sumerologist and has had to depend on available translations. He is aware of the limitations that this imposes, especially when it comes to a Sumerian passage where the translators treat the text differently. In such cases, the writer will cite the different translations. The procedure will be to follow the textual sequence of the biblical passages, listing first the relevant lines from the Hebrew Lamentations, followed by the Sumerian parallels. Comments and evaluation of the alleged parallels will be given after each parallel cited.

First it is important to note that certain parallels in the Sumerian and Hebrew texts should not be given undue significance in a study of possible literary influence. The experience of most cities in the ancient Near East under siege, and their fate upon subsequent defeat, were usually the same. Poets writing on the general theme of war and defeat, though at different times and at different places, would likely refer to the hunger, famine, pestilence, the social disintegration during the siege, the destruction of the city, the spoils taken by the victor, and the captivity of the conquered following defeat. Therefore, contrary to Kraus, the parallel references in the Hebrew and Sumerian lamentations to hunger and famine, the destruction of the city walls and temple, the burning of the city, the loss of valuables, and the captivity of the inhabitants speak not so much of parallel literary motifs but of the common experience of the vanquished at the hands

of the victor 1). One would normally expect to find in any kind of lamentation numerous references to weeping, crying and mourning. Thus the recurring parallels in Lam. i 2 a, 16 a; ii 18-19 et passim and IUr 96, 100 et passim could hardly be called upon as evidence of literary dependence. It is in these passages which deal with crying that one notes a significant difference between the Hebrew and Sumerian lamentations. In the former it is the personified city, Jerusalem, which weeps and mourns, but in the latter, Ur is never personified and the one who weeps and mourns is the goddess Ningal. Since the metaphor of bitterness which appears in Lam. i 4 c and IUr 315-316 is of such a general nature, it should be included among those parallel motifs that cannot reflect any kind of influence.

(a) Hebrew 'ēkāh ‘howl’ and the Sumerian word translated ‘alas’ (Lam. i 1, ii 1, iv 1, 2 and IUr 41, 81 et passim) have been cited by Kraus as a characteristic element of the literary genre which he calls ‘Klage um das zerstörte Heiligtum’ 2). But the expostulatory particle 'ēkāh is frequently found in other elegiac and non-elegiac passages of the Bible 3). It is attested in an elegiac passage in Ugaritic, ikm. yrqm. bn il > krt, ‘how (mournfully) it shall be said (that) Keret was the son of El’ (UT 125:20-21) 4). It seems much more probable that the Hebrew poet had in mind this Hebrew and Northwest Semitic particle than some more remote Sumerian prototype.

(b) ‘She dwells among the nations, she finds no resting place... We are wearied (but) we are given no rest’ (i 3 b; v 5); and ‘I am one who has been exiled from the city, I am one who has found no rest... I am one who has been exiled from the house, I am one who has found no dwelling place’ (IUr 306-308). Here the point of similarity is the reference to exile followed by an allusion to the lack of rest or a resting (dwelling) place. In the biblical text the

1) Compare Kraus, op. cit., pp. 9-10.
2) Ibid. This title seems a little misleading. The whole city-state was destroyed. The Sumerian poets did not restrict themselves to lamenting only the destruction of the temples and shrines. The Sumerians thought in terms of the “destruction of cities” as reflected in a me which deals specifically with the destruction of cities (see below, p. 205).
3) On the occurrence in non-elegiac passages see G. S. Glanzman, “Two Notes: Amos 3, 15 and Os. 11, 8-9” CBQ XXIII (1961), 230-232.
4) The particle is usually understood as the interrogative particle “how?” with enclitic mem (see Cyrus H. Gordon, Ugaritic Textbook [Analecta Orientalia, 38] [Rome, 1965], 19.147), but in this elegiac context it is more likely to be the expostulatory particle. On the necessity of adding an adverb in the English translation, see Glanzman, op. cit., p. 231.
reference is to Judah, but in the Ur lamentation the reference is to the goddess. The combination of “exile” and “no rest” into a single motif is not limited to these lamentations. One should compare the similar motif appearing in the covenant warning to Israel, “the Lord will scatter you among all peoples . . . among these nations you shall find no ease, and there shall be no rest for the sole of your foot” (Deut. xxviii 64-65). It seems more reasonable to assume that the poet had in mind these words, rather than knowledge of the words about Ningal which he then transformed into suitable words for the personified Jerusalem.

(c) “The roads of Zion mourn, for none come to the appointed feasts, all her gates are desolate” (i 4 a-b); and “In its lofty gates, where they were wont to promenade, dead bodies were lying about; In its boulevards, where the feasts were celebrated, . . . In all its streets, . . . In its places, where the festivities of the land took place, the people lay in heaps” (I Ur 215-217). The parallel references in these lines to “roads” and “gates” are quite dissimilar. In the Hebrew text they are personified, like the city walls in ii 8, but in the Sumerian lamentation there is no parallel personification. The Sumerian poet calls attention to the gates and streets so as to contrast what used to happen in those places with what had happened in defeat and destruction. The mere mention of “gates” and “roads” together in different lamentations over destroyed cities is not suggestive of literary influence.

(d) “From on high he sent fire” (i 13 a); and “upon him who comes from below verily he hurled fire . . . Enlil upon him who comes from above verily hurled the flame” (I Ur 259-260). Although both passages make reference to the divine use of fire, the motifs are only superficially related. Fire as a divine instrument is a recurring motif in biblical literature and Canaanite mythology 1). The burning of conquered cities and the theme of divine use of fire are so sufficiently attested in Syria-Palestine that there is no need to go all the way to Sumer to find a literary parallel or prototype.

(e) “He spread a net for my feet” (i 13 b); and “über Sumer ist das Fangnetz gefallen” (I Ur-F 200:30). KRAUS includes these lines in his list of parallel motifs. KRAMER is less certain of the meaning.

1) See Delbert R. Hillers, “Amos 7, 4 and Ancient Parallels”, CBQ XXVI (1964), 221-225; and Patrick D. Miller, “Fire in the Mythology of Canaan and Israel”, CBQ XXVII (1965), 256-261, for studies on the use of fire as a divine instrument in Northwest Semitic literature.
of this line in the Ur lamentation and translates, “Sumer is broken up by the gišburru” (IUr 195). But within the Hebrew literary and prophetic tradition the picture of Yahweh spreading a net was an established motif. Both Hosea and Ezekiel employ the motif, e.g., “I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken away in my snare; and I will bring him to Babylon . . .” (Ez. xii 13; see also xvii 20; Ho. vii 12).

(f) “How the Lord in his anger . . .” (ii 1a); and “because of the wrath of Enlil” (Akkad 1). A frequently recurring theme in Lam. ii is the anger of Yahweh, and although not mentioned in the IUr lamentation, there are numerous references in the Sumerian lamentations to the wrath of Anu and Enlil 1). Although Sumerian references to divine wrath appear in lamentations (including for the purpose of this study “The Curse of Agade”) 2) Hebrew references to the wrath of Yahweh are not restricted to this particular genre. A cursory look at any biblical concordance will be sufficient to indicate how widespread the concept of divine wrath was among the ancient Israelites. The Sumerian and Hebrew emphasis upon divine wrath in the interpretation of tragic national events is more likely to reflect an older and more general common religious tradition among the two peoples than literary dependence of the Hebrew poet upon the Sumerian lamentations.

(g) “He has bent his bow like an enemy . . . like an enemy he has slain . . . the Lord has become like an enemy” (ii 4a, 5); and “Mother Ningal in her city like an enemy stood aside . . . How long, pray, wilt thou stand aside in the city like an enemy? O Mother Ningal, (how long) wilt thou hurl challenges in the city like an enemy?” (IUr 253, 374-375). The simile “like an enemy” as applied to Yahweh does not appear elsewhere in the Bible, although there are other references to Yahweh’s being an “enemy”. In Ex. xxiii 22, the motif appears as follows, we₂āyabti ʾet ʾyēbēkā wēsarti ʾet šŏr̂rēkā, “I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries”. In Is. lxiii 10, a similar phrase occurs, wawēhāpēk lāhem le₂dyēb, “he became their enemy”. Accordingly, although there is no biblical parallel as close as the same simile in IUr, the idea itself is found in Israel’s religious tradition, and the Hebrew poet could well have coined this simile without recourse to a Sumerian prototype.

1) The title of the lamentation over Akkad in the Old Babylonian literary catalogue is listed as, “Because of the Wrath of Enlil”. See KRAMER, BASOR 88 (1942), 15.

2) See p. 198, note 5.
(h) “The Lord has rejected his altar, he has abandoned his sanctuary” (ii 7 a); and “Enlil has abandoned Nippur...Ninlil has abandoned their house...” (IUr 4, 6, et passim). The first thirty-seven lines of IUr are a list of the various temples and shrines which the different Sumerian deities had abandoned. By contrast, in the Hebrew Lamentations the motif appears only once, assuming that the above translation of MT niĝêr as “abandon” is correct. At best, the parallel is in the word and not in the meaning behind the word. Whereas in the Hebrew text Yahweh has rejected his holy city because of her sin and rebellion, Ningal and Nanna, the deities at Ur, plead for the safety of Ur and affirm her innocence. Only because the gods had not decreed eternal kingship for Ur must they bear with the calamity 8). The idea of deliberate rejection is not a part of the Sumerian parallel, but it is basic in Yahweh’s abandonment of Jerusalem.

(i) “Yahweh has determined to lay in ruins the wall of the daughter Zion...Yahweh has done what he purposed, he has fulfilled his words which he commanded long ago; he has demolished without pity...Who has given this (order) that it should come to pass? Yahweh verily 9) has given the order” (ii 8 a, 17 a-b; iii 37); and “after they had pronounced the utter destruction of my city; after they had pronounced the utter destruction of Ur, after they had directed that its people be killed...Anu changed not his command; Enlil altered not the command which he had issued” (IUr 140-142, 168-169). The same theme appears in the second lamentation, “the destruction of my city they verily gave in commission; the destruction of Ur they verily gave in commission; that its people be killed, as its fate they verily commanded” (IUr-J). These parallel motifs of divine command and purpose are seemingly quite similar. But a closer study of the thought behind these motifs indicates that the similarity is only of words, not of meaning. According to Israelite religious traditions, the destruction of Jerusalem had not been inexorably decreed by Yahweh. What was commanded and purposed by Yahweh was a covenant relationship which could not be changed. Obedience would bring blessing; disobedience would bring destruction (see Deut. xxviii and Lev. xvi). Israel’s acknowledged rebellion demanded Yahweh’s just

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1) See L. Köhler and W. Baumgartner, Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros (Leiden, 1953), sub voce niĝêr.
2) See Gadd, op. cit., p. 61.
3) Reading here the asseverative particle la' for MT la'. For a full discussion with bibliographic notes, see the writer’s “Philological Studies in Lamentations”, Biblica XLIX (1968).
fulfillment of his word (i 8 a, 18 a). Thus, in the context of Israel's faith, things could have been different if Jerusalem had been either faithful or repentant.

An entirely different understanding lies behind the Sumerian motifs of divine commission. In the myth of "Inanna and Enki: The Transfer of the Arts of Civilization from Eridu to Erech", the poet lists over one hundred "cultural traits and complexes" for which there is a me, i.e., "a set of rules and regulation assigned to each cosmic entity and cultural phenomenon for the purpose of keeping it operating forever in accordance with the plans laid down by the deity creating it" 1). The thirty-eighth me cited by the Sumerian poet, in his list of over one hundred, is the me of the "destruction of cities" 2). Apparently Ur's fate was inexorably fixed by this me, so that, innocent or not, even the gods' intercession could not change the me which Anu and Enlil had established.

There is no need to assume here that the Hebrew poet of Lamentations drew from outside his own covenant traditions when he wrote of divine purpose. The parallels with the Sumerian laments are only superficial.

(j) "He caused the rampart and wall to lament; they languish together (ii 8); and "O thou brickwork of Ur, a bitter lament set up as thy lament" (Tur 48, 53 et passim). The personification of inanimate objects is frequently encountered in funeral songs 3). What is noteworthy here is the fact that although the verb 'ābal is used with numerous other inanimate subjects or objects (including gates, land, pastures and the deep), this is the only occurrence where it is used with hēl wehōmāb, somewhat like the Sumerian "brickwork". But there is no reasonable basis to assume that though the Hebrew poets independently composed metaphors like "her gates shall lament and mourn" (Is. iii 26) and "her land mourns" (Ho. iv 3), they were influenced by a Sumerian prototype for the motif "rampart and wall lament".

(k)"... infants and babes faint in the streets of the city. Cry out in the night ... for the lives of your children who faint with hunger at the head of every street" (ii 11 c, 19); and "the father turned away

2) Ibid., p. 116.
3) See H. Jahnow, Das hebräische Leichenlied im Rahmen der Völkerdichtung (ZAW Beiheft 36) (Giessen, 1923), pp. 102-103.
from his son...the child was abandoned...Ur like the child of a street which has been destroyed seeks a place before thee” (IUr 235-236, 370). The most that can be said of these parallel motifs is that they both refer to children. There is no reference in the Sumerian lamentations to the starvation of the children, nor to the cannibalism mentioned in Lam. ii 10 and iv 20. Falkenstein translates IUr 370 as, “Ur sucht dich wie ein Kind, das sich in den Strassen verloren hat” (IUr-F 210:15), and this fits the parallelism which follows, “thy house, like a man who has lost everything stretches out the hands to thee”. There are no parallels to these similes in the Hebrew Lamentations.

(1) “My enemies have hunted me like a bird without cause” (iii 52); and “O my (city) attacked and destroyed, my (city) attacked without cause” (IUr 324-325). In the biblical lamentation there is no real assumption of the city’s innocence or plea of ignorance, such as appears in IIU 45-46: “what has my city done to thee, why hast thou turned from it? Enlil, what has my Ur done to thee...” The poet, who combines the motifs of individual and collective Hebrew laments, introduces here the theme of personal innocence, a typical motif of individual laments as found in Ps. xxxv 7, “for without cause they hid their net for me”.

(m) “The young men (have quit) their music. The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has turned to mourning” (v 14-15); and “On the uppu and ak they play not for thee that which brings joy to the heart... Thy song has been turned into weeping... The...-music has been turned into lamentation” (IUr 356). This motif of joy being turned into mourning is a recurring one, appearing in numerous Akkadian texts, the eighth century Aramaic Sefire treaty, and prophetic passages (Ez. xxvi 13; Jer. vii 34 et passim) 1). Although the original motif could possibly go back to some Sumerian source, there is no reason to assume that the motif’s appearance in v 14-15 is directly related to the Sumerian lamentations.

(n) “Restore us to thyself, O Yahweh, that we may return; renew our days as of old” (v 21); and “O father, my begetter, return my city in its unity to thy side again. O Enlil, return my Ur in its unity to thy side again” (IIU 55-56). Gadd has called attention to the similarity of these passages 2), but though they are similar it is not

2) Op. cit., p. 70. Gadd cites (p. 66) one other parallel, namely Lam. ii 6 and IIU 5, but does not elaborate, and this writer fails to see any similarity between,
necessary to assume literary influence. The plea for renewal is as natural in this context as plea for renewed health in a lamentation due to sickness, e.g. Ps. vi 5, "return O Lord, and rescue my life, save me..." If there is a literary parallel, the poet may well be echoing words from Jeremiah, "restore me that I may return, for thou art the Lord my God" (xxxvi 18).

Other more remote parallels could possibly be added to this list, but they would add little evidence either for or against the influence of Sumerian laments upon the Hebrew Lamentations. These fourteen examples that have been quoted are the closest parallels and include those motifs which are basic to any assumption of literary dependency. Certain preliminary conclusions can be drawn on the basis of this evidence. First, the parallel motifs do not seem to be as "amazing" as Krauss suggests in his commentary. All of the motifs cited from Lamentations are either attested otherwise in biblical literature or have a prototype in the literary motifs current in Syria-Palestine. Second, certain dominant themes of the Sumerian laments find no parallel at all in this Hebrew lament. For example, one would expect to find the motif of the "evil storm" (which makes up all of the fifth song and part of the sixth song of IIUr, and occurs in IIUr 10) somewhere in the biblical lamentation if there were any real literary dependency.

Any attempt to postulate Sumerian influence upon the Hebrew poets must deal with the problem of how the Hebrew poets of the mid-sixth century had knowledge of this particular Sumerian literary genre of the early second millennium. There is clear evidence that a part of the scribal and learned tradition in the post Sumerian period in Mesopotamia included knowing the Sumerian language and literary works; and even in the West, a part of the (syllabic) cuneiform scribe's learned tradition involved some elementary knowledge of Sumerian 1). Furthermore, Akkadian versions of Sumerian literary works were known in the West. A large quantity of Babylonian literary fragments, including fragments of the Gilgamesh epic, were found at the Hittite capital of Boghazkho; and fragments of Sumerian-Babylonian epics have been found at Ras Shamra 2). Moreover, several

2) See Hans G. Gatterbock, "Hittite Mythology", in Mythologies of the Ancient...
fragments of Babylonian literary texts have turned up at Megiddo and Amarna 1. According to W. G. LAMBERT, these literary works and traditions moved westward during the Amarna period (14th century) when Babylonian cuneiform was the international language from Egypt to the Persian Gulf 2. But there is no evidence that these literary works survived in Syria-Palestine. One has to assume with KRAMER that, “Sumerian influence penetrated the Bible through Canaanite, Hurrian, Hittite, and Akkadian literature”, and with LAMBERT (who writes with particular reference to the Genesis parallels) that the traditions “reached the Hebrews in oral form” 3.

To date there is no evidence of a literary genre of “lamentations over destroyed cities” in any of the above literatures, though according to A. Leo OPPENHEIM this genre of the Sumerian literary tradition is reflected in the fourth tablet of the Era Epic which includes a long lament over the destruction of Babylon 4. Nor is there any evidence that this particular literary tradition moved westward, which is not surprising since there is no special reason to assume that a lamentation over the destruction of a city would have wide popular appeal. Thus without any evidence that the Sumerian literary works survived in Syria-Palestine, or that this particular lamentation genre was known


1) See W. G. LAMBERT, op. cit., 299.
3) KRAMER, “Sumerian Literature, a General Survey”, 190; and W. G. LAMBERT, op. cit., 300.
4) Ancient Mesopotamia (Chicago, 1964), p. 267. For the Era Epic itself, see F. GÖSSMAN, Das Era-Epos (Würtzburg, 1956), and reviews of this work by W. G. LAMBERT in AfO XVIII (1958), 395-401; and B. KIENAST in ZA LIV (1961), 244-249. LAMBERT suggests that the historical background of this epic is in the Sutu raids and civil war during the reign of Adad-apal-iddinna (1067-1046) and that it was composed at the order of Nabû-apal-iddina (c. 880-850) to chronicle the fall and rise of Akkad. See also Erica REINER, “Plague Amulets and House Blessings”, JNES XIX (1960), 148-155, for a discussion on the use of parts of the Era Epic on amulets to preserve one from the plague. For an English translation of portions of the text, see KRAMER in Mythologies of the Ancient World, ed. S. N. KRAMER (New York, 1961), pp. 127-135. In terms of literary form, style and motifs, there is little, if any, resemblance between Tablet IV of the Era Epic and the Sumerian lamentations; there is no resemblance to the Hebrew Lamentations. The only apparent parallel is that the three works are concerned with the destruction of a city and references are made to wailing and crying.
in the West, it is highly improbable that one can reconstruct a reason-
able chain of literary transmission. Even if this lamentation genre
had been known during the Amarna period, there is no reason to
assume that the tradition was kept alive. Residents of Syria-Palestine
were more apt to rejoice than lament over the destruction of Mesopo-
tamian cities. If the Hebrew poets of the sixth century had knowledge
of this Sumerian lamentation tradition, it is difficult to see how they
could have learned of it in Palestine.

On the other hand it is difficult to agree with Gadd that the Hebrews
learned and adopted this literary genre during the exile 1), since there
is no evidence that the Israelites were in a mood, so shortly after the
fall of Jerusalem, to adopt a foreign form to express the loss of
national treasures in lieu of their own rich local literary traditions 2).

Since the suggested parallel motifs discussed above have at best
only general—and quite natural—similarities, and in light of the
difficulties encountered in accounting for the transmission of this
literary genre down to mid-sixth-century Palestine, it seems best to
abandon any claim of literary dependence or influence of the Sumerian
lamentations on the biblical Lamentations. At most the indebtedness
would be the idea of a lamentation over a beloved city. But since
there is such a natural corollary to individual and collective lamen-
tations or funeral laments, indebtedness may properly be discarded.

1) "The Second Lamentation for Ur", p. 61.

2) For a full discussion of Northwest Semitic lexical and syntactical elements
in Lamentations, see the writer's "Philological Studies in Lamentations",
Biblica XLIX (1968).
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