

RESURRECTING INANNA:  
LAMENT, GENDER, TRANSGRESSION

by

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## ABSTRACT

This essay, which is at once a literary critical examination and a theological exploration of the Hebraic scriptural book of Lamentations in relation to ancient Sumerian lament, employs a mixed critical approach (e.g., form, feminist, postmodern, reader response), to address various lyrical, contextual, and thematic elements common to both the biblical Lamentations and the older Sumerian compositions. Specific focus is given to issues of gender and gender-malleability, as well as the notion of “transgression” and the various meanings that may be attached to this word in various contexts, theological or otherwise. Also addressed is the means by which the lament genre reflects/reveals the ways in which individuals and communities attempt to construct meaning, or find solace, in the face of human suffering.

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## Method

The result of my research is a literary critical exploration of texts divided by space, time, and cultural difference. The barriers are manifold: spatio-temporal, cultural, linguistic, religious. My objective is to observe the links, connections, and similarities that exist between the biblical Lamentations and ancient Sumerian lament without attempting to impose some underlying and/or universalizing impulse or essence on what are clearly separate, non-reducible, particular instances of human creativity. I wish to recognize what may be viewed as “common,” or parallel, without attempting to reduce or otherwise bind the texts to my own self-constructed version of the-one-true-and-singularly-possible-only-ever-valid-explanation.

That said, I have chosen to approach the materials using a mixed-critical approach. One of the ingredients in this mix, reader-response criticism, allows me to go wither so ever I will, wither so ever the texts, and my own odd imagination, might take me. As to the self-referential nature, or tone, of much of this essay, it is part and parcel of this type of approach. Moreover, the suffering depicted in the lament texts themselves is overwhelming, and detached analysis is not my preferred means of addressing poems of great suffering.

## Introduction

This is not a paper *about* “facts.” It is, more than anything else, a study of words and images. When I use this word, “study,” I use it not as a scientist might, or a statistician, or a researcher intent on uncovering all the little truths, and methods, and implications of a particular favored perspective or interpretation. Certainly I have *studied* many *facts* along the way, and I have learned much from the meandering, many-forking paths of my research; some of this I will share. However, I do not wish to simply re-present the facts-as-I-see-them, or attempt to construct a clever amalgamation of the-facts-as-others-have-shown-them.<sup>1</sup>

Nor will I attempt to provide a shadowy chronology of long-ago events. Indeed, as Kathleen O’Connor has noted, “Lamentations is a work of art by survivors, metaphoric and symbolic, rather than a precise account of events. Because the book transposes disaster into the realm of art, it both evokes historical events and leaves them vague so as to make it difficult to date the book accurately.”<sup>2</sup> When dealing with the much older Sumerian materials, any efforts at dating or otherwise ordering the events surrounding the compositions become exponentially more difficult. Here, we enter the realm of archaeology. With regard to the lives and the unknowable personal mind-spaces of the inhabitants of the long-vanished “land of Shinar,”<sup>3</sup> we can do little more

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<sup>1</sup> I am not, after all, a collector of facts intent upon displaying my prized specimens as one might show off a colorful collection of dead butterflies, carefully labeled and artfully matted.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen O’Connor, “Voices Arguing about Meaning,” in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*, Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo, Eds., (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 27

<sup>3</sup>Genesis 10:10. Shinar is most likely a reference to Sumer.

than speculate, and our speculations are often constructed from little more than dust, and bone chips, and ancient flaking paint.

What I will attempt to provide is a meeting, an intersection, of texts. I will consider issues of gender, particularly gender malleability. Lament is, in one sense, a space where violence encounters gender, where women (or womanish men) spin a web of mourning from threads of brutality, loss, and pain. I will explore similarities between the Sumerian goddess Inanna, queen of heaven and earth, and Jerusalem as “she” is personified in Lamentations. I will also touch upon the “gendered” history of the lament genre itself, as well as the “genred” relationship that exists between the Sumerian laments and the Hebraic scriptural materials.

Throughout this essay I will return repeatedly to the notion of transgression: gender transgression, boundary transgression, theological transgression -- and resurrection, which is itself a transgression of, a crossing over or beyond, the boundary that demarcates life from death. Oxford defines transgression as “[t]he action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin.”<sup>4</sup> To transgress is “[t]o go beyond the bounds or limits prescribed by (a law, command, etc.); to break, violate, infringe, contravene, trespass against.”<sup>5</sup> Etymologically speaking, transgression appears to derive from the “French *transgression* (12th cent. in Hatzfeld & Darmesteter), < Latin *transgressiōn-em* a

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<sup>4</sup> “transgression, n.”. OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204777?redirectedFrom=transgression> (accessed April 10, 2012)

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

going over; later, a violation, transgression, sin, n. of action from *transgredī* to transgress v.”<sup>6</sup> In light of this etymology, Oxford presents a second, less sin-tinted definition of the word: “The action of passing over or beyond. (Only as the etymological sense of the word.)”<sup>7</sup>

Transgression, it seems, wears many faces; and so, too, does the goddess Inanna. Known to the Babylonians as Ishtar, Inanna was, perhaps, the Sumerians' most important deity. According to Samuel Noah Kramer, "Inanna played a greater role in [Sumerian] myth, epic, and hymn than any other deity, male or female."<sup>8</sup> Daughter of the moon god Nanna and the goddess Ningal, Inanna was "called both the First Daughter of the Moon and the Morning and Evening Star."<sup>9</sup> She is a goddess of love and fertility, and also of battle. A common refrain throughout her myths might also serve as a succinct description of her personality: "Holy Inanna did as she wished."<sup>10</sup> It has been argued that Inanna represented chaos personified.<sup>11</sup> To my mind, she seems more a personification of transgression than chaos.

So, why have I chosen, not only to include this boundary-transgressing goddess in an essay on Lamentations and ancient Sumerian lament, but to go so far as to call it by her name? For one thing, Inanna plays an important role in many Sumerian poems

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Noah Kramer, *From the poetry of Sumer: creation, glorification, adoration*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 76

<sup>9</sup> Diane Wolkstein, "Introduction," *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), xvi

<sup>10</sup> *Enki and Inanna* ETCSL

<sup>11</sup> Rivkah Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites," *History of Religions* 30:3 (February 1991): 261-278



of lament. Even when she is not mentioned by name in these texts, it still fell to her cultic personnel to perform these compositions publicly. Moving beyond the Sumerian lament texts and their performance, I wish to see what might be gleaned from a juxtaposition of this headstrong goddess and the personified Jerusalem of Lamentations. It seems that Inanna, more specifically, Inanna as we observe her in the myth of her descent to the underworld, has more in common with the fallen Jerusalem than one might suspect at first glance. As to the mention of "Resurrecting Inanna," her most well-known myth is one of death and resurrection, and the latter I will view as a species of transgression. Finally, it seems to me that the myths of the earlier, Sumerian Inanna (rather than the later, Babylonian Ishtar) have been much neglected. We can glimpse Inanna's spiteful aspect in the Gilgamesh epic, and we can find her as Ishtar in the pages of the Hebrew bible, but many of the stories surrounding this goddess have been long buried. Thus, I will attempt to "resurrect" Inanna, not just by including her in this essay, but also by retrieving and retelling one of her most important stories, that of her descent to the netherworld.

## **“Alas, my city! Alas, my house!”**

From Sumer to Hattusa,<sup>12</sup> from war-battered ancient Jerusalem to twenty-first-century Gaza, a common cry is raised: “Look, O Lord, upon my distress.”<sup>13</sup> Lament traditions were recorded throughout the ancient world, and continue to flourish throughout the world to this day. Given the pervasiveness of human suffering, it does not seem surprising that an art form which attempts to offer some sense of solace or meaning in the face of pain should be so widely practiced.

The Oxford Dictionary of Music defines lament as follows:

A term associated not only with mourning rites for the dead but also with ritual leave-taking, as in the case of a bride parting from her family or a mother’s farewell to a son recruited on war service (in many societies, perhaps most, the role of lamenter is taken by women...). The ritual character of laments embodies notions of transition to another state or world and the possibility of symbolic renewal...The predominantly vocal expression of grief in lament rituals is complemented in some cultures by instrumental music and movement that carries symbolic or numinous force; speech, poetry and dance may also play a part. The notion of lament can extend into other traditional genres such as ballad or epic, especially through performance style: ‘lamenting’ can be an interpretative approach to song or chant, a style as much as a genre. The range of symbolic functions can range from genuine mourning or parting to complaints about status in the community, or to contact with the preternatural or spirit world...Laments often bring into focus the boundaries of speech and song, composition in performance and gender- or emotion-related issues.<sup>14</sup>

Embedded within this definition are certain key points that will resurface throughout the pages that follow: more specifically, “notions of transition to another state or world and the possibility of symbolic renewal,” as well as the observation that

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<sup>12</sup> Capital of the Hittite Kingdom, located near present-day Boğazkale, Turkey

<sup>13</sup> Lamentations 1:20 (NAB). The lines could just as easily have come from the lips of Palestinian doctor Izzeldin Abuelaish, whose niece and daughters were killed by an Israeli bomb in 2009, just moments before he was scheduled to give his usual telephone update on the situation in Gaza to an Israeli television station. The doctor’s on-air lament – “Oh, God, they killed my daughters...Allah, what have we done to them?” – was soon broadcast the world over. (See Izzeldin Abuelaish, *I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey on the Road to Peace and Human Dignity*.) Lines from the Sumerian “Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur” seem tragically fitting to this story: “Lo (as) in the place where their mother labored they / lay stricken in their blood.”

<sup>14</sup> James Porter. "Lament." In *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/15902> (accessed April 10, 2012).

“in many societies, perhaps most, the role of lamenter is taken by women.” The latter observation, we will see, is not nearly as cut-and-dried as a simple “by women” seems to imply. Men may also lament, and in many cases these male lamenters “become” women in order to do this. The “transgendered” male lamenters who will appear at several points throughout this essay will, perhaps, serve to flesh out Oxford’s bare-bones definition with regard to both gender issues and themes of “composition in performance.”

Let it be noted at once, however, that Oxford’s neatly-condensed presentation of the topic is neither definitive nor final.<sup>15</sup> Nor is it quite poetic enough for my tastes. A brief glimpse at some of the oldest-known literary laments will serve to demonstrate what this word – lament – connotes. Lament is an art born of mourning. “There is lamentation in the haunted city, mourning reeds grew there. In its midst there is lamentation, mourning reeds grew there. Its people spend their days in moaning.”<sup>16</sup> It serves as a literary record of unendurable suffering. “In the city, those who had not been felled by weapons succumbed to hunger. Hunger filled the city like water, it would not cease. This hunger contorted people’s faces, twisted their muscles. Its people were as if drowning in a pond, they gasped for breath.”<sup>17</sup> It is a vehicle for the

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<sup>15</sup>It is also sexist, or, at the very least, outmoded. Must a would-be bride remain at home until such time as she is “given away,” or transferred, to a suitable new “owner”? May not a daughter, as well as a son, leave home to fight a war? Perhaps Oxford is speaking only of traditional contexts. If so, perhaps they would be wise to add a note to this effect.

<sup>16</sup> *The Lament for Sumer and Urim*, Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (ETCSL)

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

expression of bewilderment, confusion. “Why do they destroy us like palm trees which we have not tended? Why do they break us up like new boats we have not caulked?”<sup>18</sup>

Anger, too, finds its place in many poems and songs of lamentations. Divine anger or vengeance is a common theme in Sumerian lament as well as the biblical songs of Lamentations. At times, however, the lamenter’s own anger is given free expression, as in the following passage from Lamentations 2, where “the poet becomes Mother Zion bitterly confronting the Murderer of her children.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>20</sup> “Look, LORD, and consider:  
Whom have you ever treated like this?  
Should women eat their offspring,  
the children they have cared for?  
Should priest and prophet be killed  
in the sanctuary of the Lord?

<sup>21</sup> “Young and old lie together  
in the dust of the streets;  
my young men and young women  
have fallen by the sword.  
You have slain them in the day of your anger;  
you have slaughtered them without pity.

<sup>22</sup> “As you summon to a feast day,  
so you summoned against me terrors on every side.  
In the day of the LORD’s anger  
no one escaped or survived;  
those I cared for and reared  
my enemy has destroyed.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Bakke Kaiser, “Poet at ‘Female Impersonator’: The Image of Daughter Zion as Speaker in Biblical Poems of Suffering,” *The Journal of Religion* 67:2 (1987): 166

<sup>20</sup> Lamentations 2:20-22 (NIV)

## Genre Troubles

Much has been written concerning the structural and thematic similarities that appear to exist between the biblical Lamentations and the older Sumerian city-laments. I do not wish to continue in this vein, nor will I attempt to map a dubious genealogy of poetic structure and technique. Moreover, an exhaustive discussion of how a Sumerian literary form somehow found its way into the poetic repertoire of a group of 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Judean poet-intellectuals is far beyond the scope of this paper. A brief overview of the wealth of speculation concerning this relationship will suffice for the purposes of this essay.

Some have argued that the biblical Lamentations owes no more to its Sumerian predecessors than the basic theme of a lament over a city's destruction.<sup>21</sup> W.C. Gwaltney, however, suggests that the *balag-eršemmas*, "the lineal liturgical descendants of the city-laments,"<sup>22</sup> represent the link that connects the biblical Lamentations to earlier Sumerian materials. Some believe that "the Babylonian exile provided the opportunity for the Jewish clergy to encounter the laments...[and that] the exiles of the Northern Kingdom also had similar opportunities in the cities of Assyria to observe or participate in these rituals."<sup>23</sup> F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, on the other hand, posits "the

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<sup>21</sup> W.C. Gwaltney, "The Biblical Book of Lamentations in the Context of Near Eastern Lament Literature," in *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method*, ed. William Hallo (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 191-211. This is not Gwaltney's contention but, rather, that of Thomas F. McDaniel, who argues against a Sumerian influence on Lamentations. See McDaniel's "The Alleged Sumerian Influence upon Lamentations," *VT* 18 (1968): 198-209. To my mind, Gwaltney's arguments seem more plausible than McDaniel's denial.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 210. The word "eršemma means 'wail of the šem...drum.'" (Gwaltney 196) Likewise, the *balag* was also a musical instrument, most likely a drum. (Gwaltney 198).

<sup>23</sup> William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 149.

existence of a native Israelite city-lament genre comparable to the one in Mesopotamia”<sup>24</sup> which evolved independently in Israel, suggesting that the city-lament as it appears in the Hebrew bible is not simply a mimicry of its neighboring near-eastern antecedents, or a convenient foreign poetic style picked up somewhere along the dusty roadside during exile.

As tempting as it might be to indulge in a more thorough exploration of such issues and arguments, neither time nor space will permit this at present. Questions of how or where a poetic form common to all of ancient Mesopotamia first came to the attention of the biblical writers are, as I have said, well beyond the scope of this essay, as are any attempts at definitively situating the biblical book of Lamentations within a particular literary context. Whether the Hebraic scriptural book of Lamentations is the result of a poetic tradition that Israel somehow inherited from the kingdom of “Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar,”<sup>25</sup> or acquired, much later, while in exile,<sup>26</sup> or whether the muse struck separately and somehow simultaneously in Israel, must not concern me at this time. I will write of the similarities that I have observed while reading both ancient Sumerian lament and the Hebraic scriptural Lamentations, and leave it at that.

As to the broader poetic tradition of ancient Mesopotamian lament, only the barest of introductions is necessary for the purposes of this essay. The “broad outline of

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<sup>24</sup> F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993), 1

<sup>25</sup> Genesis 10:10 (NIV)

<sup>26</sup> The diaspora of a genre facilitated by the diaspora of a people

the development of laments in Mesopotamian culture can be shown to span nearly two millennia."<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the oldest known examples of "literary" lament, the Sumerian city-laments were likely composed "as a literary response to the calamity suffered throughout Sumer about 2000 B.C.E. immediately after the sack of Ur in the days of Ibbi-Sin, the last of the Third Dynasty rulers of Ur."<sup>28</sup> This first phase of the lament genre is represented by several Old Babylonian city-laments, among which *The Destruction of Ur* is perhaps the most well known.<sup>29</sup> The *eršemma*, also a Sumerian lament form of the Old Babylonian period, "relies on the description of the suffering of the devastated city to activate the sympathy of the gods."<sup>30</sup> Whereas the older city-laments deal strictly with themes of destruction and mourning, the *eršemma* also contains elements of praise. The "dying-rising myth" of Inanna or Dumuzi is another popular *eršemma* theme.<sup>31</sup> (I will discuss this myth at greater length below.)

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<sup>27</sup>Gwaltney, 195

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 196

<sup>30</sup> Mary R. Bacharova, "Sumerian *Gala* Priests and Eastern Mediterranean Returning Gods: Tragic Lamentation in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond*, ed. Ann Suter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21

<sup>31</sup> Gwaltney; also see Bacharova

## Enter, Lamentations

The biblical book of Lamentations, which was likely composed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., can be read as “an extended liturgical dirge bemoaning the fate of Jerusalem and its people after the Babylonian destruction.”<sup>32</sup> The five chapters, or songs, or poems, of Lamentations contain elements of both city-lament and *eršemma*. The biblical book is composed of five separate laments, arranged acrostically and alphabetically.<sup>33</sup> “An acrostic is a composition written in alphabetical order. Four of the book’s five poems are acrostics. The Hebrew alphabet contains twenty-two letters. All the poems contain twenty-two lines or multiples of twenty-two lines. The fifth poem is not acrostic, but because it contains twenty-two lines it is called alphabetic.”<sup>34</sup>

Although this poetic device is not something that the non-Hebrew-speaking reader can fully experience or appreciate, it bears mentioning that the highly structured formal elements of the composition(s) appear in stark contrast to the chaos, destruction, and pain that characterize the subject matter of the five poems. Perhaps the poets’ adoption of this highly formal structure represents an attempt to impose some sort of order or organization on events that seemed to be beyond all hope or comprehension. “The acrostic form is symbolic. It imposes a familiar order on the swirling chaos of the

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<sup>32</sup> Schniedewind, 149

<sup>33</sup> Claire-Antoinette Steiner, “L’écriture de l’inconsolable: Le livre des Lamentations,” *Foi et Vie* 108, no. 4 (2009), 8.; see also O’Connor.

<sup>34</sup> O’Connor, 29



world. It implies that suffering is so enormous, so total, that it spreads from a to z...There are no letters left for more suffering."<sup>35</sup>

The biblical Lamentations can thus be viewed as an exercise in ordering pain, an attempt at containing chaos within a cage constructed of words. For the voices/poets of the biblical Lamentations, all that was known or loved has been lost and the god to whom they would turn for consolation is actually the enemy responsible for the destruction of a beloved city, as well as the exile and captivity of its people. Thus, the structure of the five poems of Lamentations may be viewed as an attempt to shape an incomprehensible experience of pain, suffering, and destruction into a tightly-controlled linguistic/poetic form.

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

## Miscellania

In the Sumerian laments, “the disappearance of a divinity allows for the destruction of his or her city, and a goddess plays the motherly role of intercessor.”<sup>36</sup> In the biblical book of Lamentations, the God of Israel has withdrawn from the city and its people: “You have covered yourself with a cloud/so that no prayer can get through.”<sup>37</sup> In response, Jerusalem adopts the role of heartbroken mother, bitterly lamenting: “Those whom I bore and reared/my enemy has utterly destroyed.”<sup>38</sup> Alas, Yahweh has forsaken Jerusalem and its inhabitants, turned a deaf ear to the suffering city, and even Lady Jerusalem’s entreaties are met with an icy silence.

A common element of near-eastern lament traditions that is seemingly lacking in Lamentations is a “plea to other deities (often a goddess) to intercede” on behalf of the people and restore order to the devastated city.<sup>39</sup> In subsequent pages, we will observe as the fallen city, Jerusalem, plays the role of weeping goddess, but for the mono(patria)theistic Israelites there existed no “real” goddess, at once loving and powerful, to whom they might turn in their time of great suffering. Perhaps the Hebrew God serves a dual purpose, or plays a double role, in Lamentations? True, he is the bloodthirsty and vengeful destroyer of Jerusalem: “You have covered yourself with anger and pursued us;/you have slain without pity.”<sup>40</sup> But he is also the one

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<sup>36</sup> Bacharova, 24

<sup>37</sup> Lamentations 3:44 (NIV)

<sup>38</sup> Lamentations 2:22 (NIV)

<sup>39</sup> Gwaltney; See also Bacharova

<sup>40</sup> Lamentations 3:43 (NIV)

toward whom the speakers in Lamentations direct their prayers and their tears: “My eyes will flow unceasingly,/without relief,/until the LORD looks down/from heaven and sees.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Lamentations 3:49-50 (NIV)

## The Lament-Gender Connection

It has often been suggested that lament is, at least traditionally, a “gendered” artistic form. Beyond the private mourning of an individual woman observing a personal loss, communal “ritual lament was a prominent activity for women in ancient societies. It seems to have been the one medium in which they might have expressed themselves and their concerns publicly and thereby have influenced a community’s affairs.”<sup>42</sup> Many have suggested that lament is a predominately “feminine” vehicle for expression. “Even in cultures where any musical performance by women is frowned upon, women sing laments.”<sup>43</sup>

Although I am extremely reluctant to accept any explanation that proposes that it is the naturally conciliatory nature of women, our inborn warmth, compassion, and loving-kindness, that renders us particularly well-suited to soothe an angry god or lend solace to a community torn by tragedy and paralyzed by grief, it cannot be denied that, across cultures, lament has traditionally been the domain of women and, also, effeminate or deliberately feminized men who attempted “to harness the powers of a well-established type of female verbal art to conciliate the gods.”<sup>44</sup>

What factors or facets of life in the ancient world might account for the supposed feminine origins of the lament genre? One possible explanation might be that, in cultures where men generally do the fighting and women the staying behind, it will

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<sup>42</sup>Ann Suter, “Introduction” in *Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond*, ed. Ann Suter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3

<sup>43</sup>Jerrold S. Cooper, “Genre, Gender, and the Sumerian Lamentation,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 58 (2006): 44

<sup>44</sup>Bacharova, 22

most likely fall to the women to mourn and bury the war dead; with their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons all slaughtered or carried off to enemy camps, only the women remain to conduct the necessary funerary rites.

Alternatively, perhaps in cultures where men are valued based on strength of arms above all else, it is not fitting that they should indulge in open grief or public displays of mourning. Again, the necessary rites of closure and grieving will fall to women. Of course, these suggestions are little more than speculation and call for further investigation; moreover, such possible explanations are simplistic and do not even begin to touch upon the complexities of human emotion or the many ways in which warfare disrupts the lives of all those it touches.<sup>45</sup> Still, such suggestions seem to me no more absurd, and no more simplistic, than accepting/assuming that biology somehow necessarily dictates character.

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<sup>45</sup> Such questions/issues are well beyond the scope of this paper. I am just toying with possibilities.

If we move beyond the bloodless domain of cognitive speculation to the lament texts themselves, the lament-gender connection is further complicated. Within the Sumerian city-laments male voices mingle freely with those of lamenting goddesses and queens to express identical sentiments of bereavement and confusion.<sup>46</sup> “Suen wept to his father Enlil: ‘O father who begot me, why have you turned away from my city which was built (?) for you? O Enlil, why have you turned away from my Urim which was built (?) for you?’”<sup>47</sup> In a lament composed after the destruction of the Sumerian city Nibrum, not a single female voice is heard; the men alone lament. “The men whose wives had fallen, whose children had fallen, were singing ‘Oh our destroyed city!’”<sup>48</sup> In the lament for Eridug, both the city’s king and its patron (male) deity<sup>49</sup> remain weeping outside of the city as it is destroyed by the Elamites. “Its king stayed outside his city as if it were an alien city. He wept bitter tears. Father Enki stayed outside his city as if it were an alien city. He wept bitter tears. For the sake of his harmed city, he wept bitter tears.”<sup>50</sup>

*Alas, my essay! Alas, my thesis!* The tears of gods and men stain the pages upon which I had hoped to demonstrate the gendered character of the lament genre. How lamentable seems my writerly predicament at this moment in text. Actually, I will not

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<sup>46</sup> There are male voices woven in among the female voices of Lamentations as well; this alternation of speaker was a common device used in laments throughout ancient Mesopotamia.

<sup>47</sup> Suen, god-king of Urim, laments to his father, Enlil. From “The Lament for Sumer and Urim,” ETCSL. Question marks following “built” indicate that that translation is uncertain.

<sup>48</sup> *The lament for Nibru*, ETCSL

<sup>49</sup> The king and the god may actually be a single divine personage. The later Sumerians seem to have viewed their kings as earth-bound embodiments of divinity, the god-kings of Sumer.

<sup>50</sup> *The lament for Eridug*, ETCSL

tear my hair or rend my clothes just yet, nor will I dig a grave in which to deposit the charred remains of my would-have-been manuscript.

The Sumerian city-laments are literary productions. As such, they may be read, or approached, as one might read Milton's *Paradise Lost* or the beautiful prose-poetry of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. Long, long ago, however, the Sumerian laments were also ritually-enacted sacred texts.<sup>51</sup> They were sacred scripts, if you will, to be performed, or recited, at specified times, such as during the renovation of a temple.<sup>52</sup> Lament may be a literary genre, but it is also enacted, a verb. Recall the Oxford definition given above: "composition in performance." Perhaps these rituals of lamentation were enacted by clergy before an audience of believers in Enlil, or Enki, or Inanna. Perhaps such ritual recitations were more participatory in nature, and the performer/onlooker divide was not so very wide, after all. We cannot say, really, because so little is known about the religious lives of the ancient Sumerians.

The evidence that we do have, however, strongly suggests that there once existed in Sumer a group of priestesses, the *gala*, and that one of the primary functions of these priestesses was to sing ritual laments. Although the office was originally held exclusively by women, it was later assumed by (or possibly shared with) men.<sup>53</sup> "These

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<sup>51</sup> Technically, they were baked-clay tablets incised with cuneiform characters, then somehow buried for many years beneath the sands of what is now Iraq and only recently – within the past two centuries or so – rediscovered, dug up, and painstakingly pieced back together. But I will call a text a text, regardless of the technology used to record it or the means by which it is recovered.

<sup>52</sup> Gwaltney, 196

<sup>53</sup> "Women may actually have served as *gala* in Presargonic Lagash...Old Akkadian documents from the Diyala mention women lamenters,...and a 'women lamenters' organization.'" Cooper, 43. Do the male *gala*, then, represent an instance of a locus of potential female empowerment being safely assumed by men once it was recognized as potentially disruptive of the *staus quo*? Perhaps. Certainly the question calls for further exploration, although

[original] priestesses or songstresses,” suggests Jerrold S. Cooper, “were later joined by male colleagues who eventually replaced them as performers of ritual laments, males who retained both the dialect and the opprobrium that reflected the gendered beginnings of their genre.”<sup>54</sup>

So, the male characters in the lament texts may be seen to weep and wail as loudly as any thwarted goddess or deposed queen, but when it came time for public recitation of these laments, the job fell to the female *gala* priestesses or to the feminized *gala* priests, men who had adopted both the female lamenter’s art and her womanly appearance.

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evidence points to the continued participation of women in Sumerian rituals of lamentation alongside the male *gala*, indicating that the relationship between female lamenters and their priestly impersonators was more complex than a simple replacement/ usurpation explanation suggests.

<sup>54</sup> Cooper, 45



## A Gala Affair

Gender-transgressing priests of the goddess Inanna, the *gala* sang their laments in *emesal*, a dialect that was otherwise used exclusively by women, thus retaining yet another vestige of the art's female origin. Just as the Sumerian *gala* are able to "transcend their male gender by imitating the feminine mourning of the queen of the Underworld, Inanna herself is able to transcend genders, an ability that should be associated with her return from the Underworld."<sup>55</sup> Beyond simply "imitating ...feminine mourning," the *gala* also performed laments for the purpose of averting divine anger that might otherwise be turned upon the city. Recall that Oxford's definition of lament, provided above, specifies that lament may sometimes include or entail "contact with the preternatural or spirit world." The *gala* seem to fit the bill in this regard.

Another rite of the *gala*, a ritual "procession described in the Sumerian 'Iddin-Dagan A' hymn in which humans cross-dress and slash themselves in honor of Inanna,"<sup>56</sup> presents an interesting parallel to the behavior of the goddess's faithful lamenters in the Sumerian myth of Inanna's descent to the netherworld. Whether the myth was born of a pre-existing ritual or the ritual constructed based upon a pre-existing myth I cannot say. However, the myth of Inanna's descent, as well as the ritual observances that seem to point to elements of this myth, recall to my mind, once more, the Oxford definition provided in the Introduction: "The ritual character of laments

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<sup>55</sup> Bacharova, 35

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 36

embodies notions of transition to another state or world and the possibility of symbolic renewal.”

All of the lamenters' actions in *Inanna's descent* are performed with a single aim in mind: to resurrect Inanna. What outcomes the "real-life" Sumerian lamenters may have expected from the performance of such rituals, or what comfort they may have derived in performing them, I cannot say. I am not aware of any Sumerian or Akkadian texts that make mention of the priests' motivations or their personal reactions to the rituals they performed in Inanna's honor; nor have I come across anything that might shed some light on the "lay" worshipper's views of either ritual or myth. It seems that we have a collection of myths, a scattering of descriptions of ritual performances that seem to point to these myths, and no broader theological framework to which to attach them. In any event, following is a brief description, taken from the myth of Inanna's descent, which shares some features with the procession described in the Iddin-Dagan hymn to Inanna:

After three days and three nights had passed, her minister Ninšubur...carried out the instructions of her mistress...She made a lament for her in her ruined (houses). She beat the drum for her in the sanctuaries. She made the rounds of the houses of the gods for her. She lacerated her eyes for her, she lacerated her nose. In private she lacerated her buttocks for her. Like a pauper, she clothed herself in a single garment, and all alone she set her foot in the E-kur, the house of Enlil.<sup>57</sup>

Likewise, the goddess's beloved singer, Šara,<sup>58</sup> and Lulal, who appears to be a priest of sorts, or perhaps some sort of dignitary, had both, it seems, spent the entirety of Inanna's underworld tenure wallowing about in the dust clothed in filthy garments;

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<sup>57</sup> *Inanna's descent to the nether world*, ETCSL

<sup>58</sup> Who is also, interestingly, referred to by the goddess as "my manicurist and my hairdresser"

thus, the goddess considers these men to be lamenters *par excellence*. For this reason, neither they, nor the ever-faithful Ninšubur, are made to take the goddess's place in the netherworld. Inanna's husband Dumuzi, on the other hand, is found relaxing beneath "the great apple tree in the plain of Kulaba...clothed in a magnificent garment and seated magnificently on a throne."<sup>59</sup> For his failure to observe the proper mourning rituals, Dumuzi is carried off by the demons that accompanied the goddess on her ascent from the underworld, and it is he who must now serve as Inanna's substitute in the city of death.

Leaving Dumuzi to his (well-deserved) punishment, let us now return to Inanna's cultic personnel. As a result of their transgendered status, as well as their association with a dying-rising goddess who was herself the patroness of transsexuals,<sup>60</sup> the *gala* were seen as being particularly well-suited to bridge the gap between the worlds, to capture the gods' fickle attention. Both Inanna and her *gala* devotees may be viewed as liminal figures, able to breach "two of the barriers that 'cannot be crossed' ... that of biologically determined gender and that between the living and the dead."<sup>61</sup>

Throughout the ancient world, from Anatolia to Rome, there existed priesthoods similar to that of the *gala*: feminized (and often castrated) men devoted to various local goddesses.<sup>62</sup> In later antiquity, "the galli [*galloi*] were part of an official Roman state

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<sup>59</sup> *Inanna's descent*, ETCSL

<sup>60</sup> Bacharova, 36. Inanna was "the goddess in charge of transsexuality."

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, 35

<sup>62</sup> Usually these were fertility goddesses. In Hellenistic times it was the shepherd-god Attis, consort of the goddess Cybele, who inspired the priests' devotion. Attis, like many of his followers, was an androgynous figure, having

religion with manifestations in every part of the Greco-Roman world and at every level of society.”<sup>63</sup> Known as much for their practice of self-castration as for “the loud, shrill music, described as a cacophony of flutes, cymbals, and drums, that accompanied their performances,”<sup>64</sup> the *galloi* were initially “temple personnel in the cities of central Anatolia.”<sup>65</sup> Devoted to the cult of Cybele and Attis, the religious rites of the *galloi* were said to induce “a temporary, healing form of madness or loss of consciousness”<sup>66</sup> in those who witnessed them. Only a small portion of the *galloi*’s ritual repertoire involved the performance of lament, but there remain “obvious parallels between the castrated *galloi*, who would wail and beat on drums, and the rites performed by the Sumerian *gala* priests.”<sup>67</sup>

Both Inanna’s *gala* priests and their later Mesopotamian and Mediterranean counterparts practiced their priestly arts within a similar religio-performative context: that of the “female-impersonating” priest enacting a religio-performative ritual or script. With regard to Inanna’s Sumerian *gala* priests, this religious performance is doubly transgressive: it is given by a person, neither man nor woman, neither of this world nor the next, who, therefore, fails to adhere to two of the most basic principles by which this world is ordered: whose appearance and mannerisms transgress the line that

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been castrated, either voluntarily or otherwise – depending on which version of the myth one reads. See M.J. Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis: The Myth and the Cult*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1977.

<sup>63</sup>Will Roscoe, “Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion,” *History of Religions* 35, no. 3 (February 1996): 196, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062813>. For Christians writing at the time, the galli represented all that was terribly wrong with pagan religion and culture. “And of all the outrages of the galli, none horrified them more than the radical manner in which they transgressed the boundaries of gender.” *ibid.*, 196

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 202

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, 198. This Anatolian origin is what first prompted me to include the *galloi* in my research.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, 202

<sup>67</sup> Bacharova, 36

separates *male* from *female*, and whose cultic or ritual function transgresses the line that demarcates life and death, the world of man and the otherworld that the gods inhabit.

## Jerusalem

In Jerusalem, as well as Sumer,<sup>68</sup> we can also find instances of men miming women in the context of lament. In her essay, *Poet as "Female Impersonator": The Image of Daughter Zion as Speaker in Biblical Poems of Suffering*, Barbara Bakke Kaiser notes that "the Israelite poets 'become women' when expressing the full intensity of the community's suffering."<sup>69</sup> There appears to be a usual progression in passages where the Hebrew poet assumes a female persona: "First the narrator speaks about Jerusalem, then he addresses Jerusalem personally; finally he *becomes* Jerusalem."<sup>70</sup>

In Lamentations, which features a multiplicity of voices, "the level of intensity increases when Zion herself speaks."<sup>71</sup> Bakke Kaiser, quoting Delbert Hillers, notes that one effect of this shifting point-of-view "'is to heighten the expression of anguish, and to intensify the participation in this anguish by the worshipper when the poem is used liturgically."<sup>72</sup>

Recall the passage from Lamentations 2, quoted at length above, in which the personified "mother," Zion, voices her anger at the god-enemy who has slaughtered her children. According to Bakke Kaiser, it is at this point in Lamentations 2 when the poem's "bitter tone reaches its height."<sup>73</sup> Although the translation (NIV) from which I took this passage does convey Mother Zion's anger to a point, the Hebrew poets

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<sup>68</sup> And beyond, as the preceding pages have shown.

<sup>69</sup> Bakke Kaiser, 166

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, 170

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, 174

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, 179

employed “some aesthetic techniques that are not immediately apparent in translation.”<sup>74</sup> Thus, there are elements of tone that may be lost upon the non-Hebrew-speaking reader (as well as the non-astute, or the deliberately euphemizing, translator).

“Problems with translation of verse 20 [in particular] obscure Mother Zion’s sharp tone.”<sup>75</sup> While these lines are usually translated in such a way that they seem to represent “an attempt to evoke Yahweh’s pity over the starving population and the enemies’ slaughter of his chosen ministers,”<sup>76</sup> Bakke Kaiser points to “a textual problem”<sup>77</sup> that most translations of this passage fail to address. “The final clause has a plural subject, ‘priest and prophet’ (*kohen wenabi*), but a singular verb (*yehareg*). Furthermore, passive verbal forms, like the *niphal yehareg*, occur rarely in this lament, which favors direct, dynamic action.”<sup>78</sup> Bakke Kaiser suggests an alternative reading/translation of this passage, one that appears to resolve the issue of subject-verb disagreement:

“Should women eat their own ‘fruit,’  
Children fully formed?  
Should Adonai slay in the sanctuary  
Prophet and priest?”<sup>79</sup>

In Bakke Kaiser’s translation, the verse no longer seems designed to evoke Yahweh’s pity, but rather, to condemn him for murdering his own priests within the

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, 180

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*

sanctuary of his temple. Bakke Kaiser's reading of this verse "more clearly echoes verse 4, which accuses Yahweh of slaying his people."<sup>80</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Like an enemy he has strung his bow;  
his right hand is ready.  
Like a foe he has slain  
all who were pleasing to the eye;  
he has poured out his wrath like fire  
on the tent of Daughter Zion.<sup>81</sup>

Her translation also "links well with the next verse, in which Zion will again accuse Yahweh of slaughtering (*hrg*) her people."<sup>82</sup>

<sup>21</sup> "Young and old lie together  
in the dust of the streets;  
my young men and young women  
have fallen by the sword.  
You have slain them in the day of your anger;  
you have slaughtered them without pity."<sup>83</sup>

Not content to simply slaughter the city's inhabitants, it would seem that Yahweh also wishes to ensure that Judah's enemies remain well fed. (Why, after all, leave so much good meat for only flies and vultures to enjoy?) "Beginning with a pathetic reference to starving mothers reduced to cannibalism, Mother Zion portrays Yahweh as butchering his meat (i.e. Jerusalem's population) and inviting Zion's enemies to a feast: 'You have summoned as on a feast day my terrors round about.'"<sup>84</sup>

Bakke Kaiser contends that Judah's "perception of Yahwah as Enemy is indeed intense, and it is through the adoption of the persona of a grieving mother that the poet

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Lamentations 2:4 (NIV)

<sup>82</sup> Bakke Kaiser, 180

<sup>83</sup> Lamentations 2:21 (NIV)

<sup>84</sup> Bakke Kaiser, 181; the verse quoted is Lamentations 2:22



can best convey the force of bitterness and grief.”<sup>85</sup> In the conclusion to her essay, Bakke Kaiser suggests that a “recognition of the vitality of the female *persona* in the Hebrew Bible might be a useful step toward the full and free acknowledgment of women as *persons*.”<sup>86</sup>

I second her sentiments, to a point, but I would also like to offer a possible alternative to this suggestion. I do not deny that the poets of Lamentations seem to adopt a female persona to express a greater intensity of emotion – whether grief, or anger, or humiliation. However, I am not as optimistic as Bakke Kaiser with regard to the implications of this poetic transgendering. I have a nagging, needling suspicion that the male poet might be keen to somehow escape his own skin, so to speak, when questioning a wrathful god’s murderous tendencies. “Should Adonai slay in the sanctuary/Prophet and priest?” Should Adonai, oh, I don’t know... Slaughter his children and invite his cronies to feast upon their corpses?<sup>87</sup>

Perhaps, before we unquestioningly celebrate “the vital role”<sup>88</sup> played by women in the biblical poems of suffering, we should also consider the possibility that the Hebrew poets’ use of the female voice also functioned as a form of poetic scapegoating, a screen behind which to cower, lest their bitter words against a wrathful god provoke a

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<sup>85</sup>ibid., 182

<sup>86</sup>ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Not that this is terribly relevant to the context of this essay, but I cannot help but draw comparisons between the cruel, city-destroying Yahweh, who slaughters his own children, and the Titan, Kronos, who devours the children he has fathered with Rhea. Certainly, neither deserves any “Father of the Year” award.

<sup>88</sup> ibid.

repeat of his legendary anger.<sup>89</sup> *It was not I, O Lord, who uttered those words; 'twas the woman who spoke such evil thoughts.*

Let us turn now from this consideration of the Hebrew poets' figurative use/s of the female persona in Lamentations and focus our attention, instead, upon one of the most important female *persons*, or figures, in ancient Sumerian lament: the goddess Inanna.

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<sup>89</sup> If you are going to poke at an animal that has already provided you with repeat demonstrations of its viciousness, is it not safer to poke with a stick rather than your own, unprotected finger?

## Inanna

*A lament was raised in the city:*

*“My Lady weeps bitterly for her young husband.  
Inanna weeps bitterly for her young husband.  
Woe for her husband! Woe for her young love!  
Woe for her house! Woe for her city!”<sup>90</sup>*

Thus weeps the woeful widow. Interestingly, Inanna is a self-made widow, as it was by her own command that her “young love” Dumuzi was carried off to the underworld. Still, a self-made widow may weep, I suppose. But let me explain. The story is a pretty one, and it will perhaps serve to illustrate the importance of the lamenter’s art in Sumerian culture. Besides, my “soul is weary unto sorrow”<sup>91</sup> with *academic-style* writing, and if I do not now break up the monotony of this essay with a story I fear that my night, too, will end in bitter weeping.

True, I could simply summarize this story and move quickly on to less literary matters, but if so much is lost in translation, imagine how much more is lost in summarization. I would rather show, than simply tell, you of Inanna's descent and resurrection. It may seem that we are now preparing to take a scenic, or aesthetic, detour of sorts before returning once more to the themes of this essay, but this is not the case. The story I will now tell is no departure from this essay's chosen course; indeed, Inanna's story contains within itself all of the themes that I have thus far touched upon. Perhaps a story is exactly what is needed to bring these things to life.

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<sup>90</sup> Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, “The Return” in *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 85.

<sup>91</sup> Psalm 119:28 (NIV) I suspect the psalmist responsible for this line was also attempting to finish a thesis...

### *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld*<sup>92</sup>

One day, for no particular reason (at least, the story gives no motive, and the reader is left to imagine that perhaps a grasping nature or mere boredom compelled her to act as she did), Inanna decided that she would like to be, not only queen of heaven and of earth, but dark mistress of the underworld as well. The goddess dressed, and did her make-up, and arranged her black hair. She put on her jewels of lapis lazuli. Having gathered all that she thought she would require for safe passage to the netherworld, she addressed her trusted minister, Ninšubur. "Love, I'm off to the underworld. My sister's having a baby and her husband just died. I'm going to the funeral, and while I'm there I think I might as well take over the place."

Of course, the funeral was just an excuse. Inanna had long coveted her sister's dreary subterranean domain. Now, with Ereškigala as pregnant as the full moon and still weak with mourning, Inanna believed the time was ripe and the dark city hers for the taking. Or did she? As she swallowed the last of the fragrant date wine and tossed aside her empty cup, a strange foreboding took hold of Inanna. Call it women's intuition, or divine foresight – call it what you will. A sudden chill slipped into the room, and the goddess shivered in her royal robe; her delicate gold ring stung like ice upon her finger, and the lovely double strand of lapis beads twined tight about her tawny neck like twin serpents.

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<sup>92</sup> This is an old, old story – perhaps among the world's oldest stories. The re-telling, however, is entirely my own, and I have taken great literary liberties with the material. For a more traditional version of Inanna's Descent, see Wolkstein & Kramer. For the "original" version of the story, see *Inana's descent to the nether world* in ETCSL.

Clasping her minister's hand and hurrying through the door and out into the blinding morning sun, the goddess spoke once more. "Ninšubur, my dove, my only friend. Listen carefully to my instructions." Inanna walked as she spoke, each step bringing her closer to the underworld gates. "I am going down to hell. If I'm not back in three days' time, go to the ruin mounds, weeping. Beat a drum and dress yourself in beggar's rags. Cut your eyes, your mouth, your thighs. Go to Enlil's house, lamenting. He'll ignore you, most likely. He still hasn't forgotten that time I got drunk with Enki, who gave me the seven divine powers, which I carry with me now."

By this time, the pair were halfway to the underworld. Inanna continued her instructions. "Next, go to Nanna, lamenting. Beat a drum and dress yourself in beggar's rags. Cut your eyes, your mouth, your thighs. Nanna, too, will disregard your pleas. I don't think he's ever liked me much, really."

As they were now nearly to the outermost gate of the underworld, Inanna embraced her minister and gave her one final instruction. "When Nanna refuses you, go to Enki, lamenting. Beat a drum and dress yourself in beggar's rags. Cut your eyes, your mouth, your thighs. Enki's a doll. He won't let me die. Go now, and do as I have said."

As Ninšubur departed, Inanna made her way to first of the underworld's seven gates. She banged her fists against the heavy door and shouted, "Neti, let me in! It is I, Inanna, Queen of Heaven. Open the gate!" The doorman, thus awakened from a quiet midday nap, stretched his skeletal arms above his head and yawned. "Tsk-tsk, noisy

girl. Why have you come to the underworld?"

Impatient, Inanna abused the corpse-like doorman with her careless tongue as she continued to bang her small fists against the massive door. "Neti, you moldering fool! I've come for the funeral libations that my sister has promised. I've come to honor her worthy husband, Lord Gud-gal-ana, may he rest in peace. He bit the dust, and now I wish to drink to his memory."

The doorman rose and went to his queen. "My Lady," said he, "a tiresome girl is throwing fits at the outermost gate. It is Inanna, your little sister. She is adorned with the seven divine powers. She says she has come for the funeral beer." Ereškigala absently stroked her near-ripened belly as she turned the matter this way and that in her mind. Finally, the underworld queen addressed her most trusted servant. "Neti, take heed, this girl is a danger. Bolt the gates, all seven. Then bid Inanna enter. Next, open each gate singly - not wide, mind you! Open each gate just a sliver, just wide enough for the troublesome slip of a girl to slide through without being squashed. At each gate, take something from her. She must enter my throne room naked, stripped of the seven divine powers."

As always, Neti did as the dark queen instructed. The seven gates were bolted fast. Neti went to the outermost gate where Inanna stood waiting. He opened this gate just a sliver, and the Queen of Heaven slipped through, like a sunbeam through a shuttered window.

As she entered the first gate, her crown was removed. "What is this?" Inanna

asked. "Quiet, girl!," replied the doorman. "It's underworld protocol." At the second gate, they took her necklace of lapis lazuli. At the third gate, the egg-shaped beads were snatched from her breast. At the fourth gate, her breastplate was taken. At the fifth gate, the finely-wrought ring of gold was slipped from her finger. At the sixth gate, she was made to relinquish her lapis lazuli scepter. At each gate, the goddess asked, "What is this?" The response never varied - *underworld protocol*.

Finally, Neti led Inanna to the seventh and final gate of the underworld. He opened this gate just a sliver, and the Queen of Heaven slipped through, like a shadow in a darkened room. At the seventh gate, her dress was removed. The royal garment slid from her body, the silk whispered against the cold stone floor.

Inanna entered the throne room, naked and shivering. Ereškigala rose from her throne, descended the three-tier dais, and greeted her sister. "Hello, my dear. What brings you to the underworld?" Inanna smiled sweetly at her sister and asked for something to drink. A small, rag-clad demon appeared instantly with a cup of warm funeral beer. Inanna raised her glass, "To Gud-gal-ana! Poor guy. I'll miss him." Still a bit chilled, but enjoying the warmth of the heady netherworld brew, Inanna strolled about the room as if she owned the place. She ascended the three-tier dais as if to inspect Ereškigala's throne; she wiped a bit of dust from the finely-woven cushion, she sat upon the throne. The impunity! Like some fine Sumerian lady relaxing in her own favorite parlor chair at the end of a long day, Inanna sat upon her sister's throne.

Ereškigala smiled. It was the sort of smile that could freeze a person's insides, or

make a fully-armored warrior cry for his mother. Inanna flung her bare legs over the arm of Ereškigala's throne and continued to sip her drink. The underworld queen eyed her sister for a moment, and then muttered something under her breath. She began to circle the room, arms raised, murmuring as she walked. She quickened her pace and spoke now more loudly – words of wrath, a curse. She circled the room again and again, chanting, the long, dark sleeves of her royal robe billowing out around her like storm clouds. A single image entered Inanna's mind as she watched her sister, transfixed – *A vulture*. The thought was dim, as if coming to her through a mist, and yet it spread to all the corners of her mind, filling her vision entirely. She began to feel very sleepy, as she surrendered at last to this single encircling thought – *My sister is so like a vulture*. And then she thought no more.

Inanna's body slid from the throne, her dark hair whispered against the cold stone floor. The bronze cup slipped from her hand and rolled across the cavernous hall, echoing. The holy widow Ereškigala, gazing now at her sister's lifeless form, began to weep; the fearsome queen began to moan. “Oh, Gud-gal-ana, if you had not died, my beautiful sister never would have come here! Oh, Inanna, you reckless girl! Alas, my husband! Alas, my sister!” (Alas, the incomprehensible ways of the goddess! You kill your sister in one breath, and in the very next you mourn her. Go figure.)

As the twin pangs of grief intensified, Ereškigala, now swaying to and fro beneath the weight of her double bereavement, as the marsh reed sways in the steppe-born wind, began to feel pangs of a different sort. She clutched at her over-ripe belly,



“Oh, my belly! Oh, my baby!” From all sides her demons appeared, a ghastly swarm of netherworld midwives. The small demons and the large demons jostled, tripping over themselves and one another in their haste to aid their mistress. At last the laboring goddess was carried to bed and her chamber prepared for the baby’s arrival. Demons scurried this way and that: some bringing hot water, some carrying soft towels and soothing ointments.

In the bustle of the demons’ preparations, Inanna lay forgotten. Her legs had slipped from the throne arm and now lay against the soft, woven cushion; her bottom had come to rest on the topmost edge of the dais and her arms dangled this way and that. Her head was tilted backward and her long hair tumbled down the three-tier dais, spilling against the cold stone floor like a black waterfall. Even dead and upside down, she looked very pretty. Finally, one of the more self-collected demons noticed the goddess lying there. “Have some respect!” he shouted. “Somebody put that girl right-side-up.” And so the demons collected Inanna and took her to Ereškigala’s bedroom, where she was hung from a hook on the wall, like a slab of meat or a mourning wreath.

When three days and three nights had passed, Ninšubur dressed herself in filthy beggar’s rags. She went to the ruin mounds, weeping. She beat a drum and wailed a lament for Inanna. She slashed her eyelids, her lips, her soft inner thigh. She set out alone for E-kur, the house of Enlil. She tapped against the heavy door and cried, “Father Enlil, are you at home? It is I, Ninšubur. My mistress has gone to the underworld. Please let me in!” Enlil himself opened the door to Inanna’s fair-spoken

minister. “Hello, Ninšubur, both faithful and wise. What brings you to E-kur?” The woman burst into tears. “Oh, Father Enlil,” she lamented, “Don’t allow your young daughter Inanna to be killed in the underworld! She hangs now from a hook in Ereškigala’s bedchamber, like a slab of meat or a mourning wreath. Don’t leave Inanna to rot in the underworld!”

The angry god responded with sharp words. “Not content with the great heaven, Inanna sought the great below as well. My grasping daughter craved the underworld powers. Such divine powers are not for the likes of Inanna. Tell me, Ninšubur, who, having sampled such things, can expect to return again to earth? Inanna is lost to us; below she must remain.”

Receiving no aid from Enlil, she set off now for E-kiš-nu-ĝal, the house of Nanna. She tapped against the heavy door and cried, “Father Nanna, are you at home? It is I, Ninšubur. My mistress has gone to the underworld. Please let me in!” Nanna himself opened the door to Inanna’s fair-spoken minister. “Hello, Ninšubur, both faithful and wise. What brings you to E-kiš-nu-ĝal?” The woman burst into tears. “Oh, Father Nanna,” she lamented, “Don’t allow your young daughter Inanna to be killed in the underworld! She hangs now from a hook in Ereškigala’s bedchamber, like a slab of meat or a mourning wreath. Don’t leave Inanna to rot in the underworld!”

The angry god responded with sharp words. “Not content with the great heaven, Inanna sought the great below as well. My grasping daughter craved the underworld powers. Such divine powers are not for the likes of Inanna. Tell me,

Ninšubur, who, having sampled such things, can expect to return again to earth?

Inanna is lost to us; below she must remain.”

When Nanna refused to help her, Ninšubur made her way to Eridug, the house of Enki. She tapped against the heavy door and cried, “Father Enki, are you at home? It is I, Ninšubur. My mistress has gone to the underworld. Please let me in!” Enki himself opened the door to Inanna’s fair-spoken minister. “Hello, my dear. What brings you to Eridug? Please, come inside.” Relieved, Ninšubur burst into tears. “Oh, Father Enki,” she lamented, “Don’t allow your young daughter Inanna to be killed in the underworld! She hangs now from a hook in Ereškigala’s bedchamber, like a slab of meat or a mourning wreath. Don’t leave Inanna to rot in the underworld!”

Enki, the very portrait of fatherly kindness, answered her thus: “Oh, my daughter worries me so! The things that girl will do. Don’t cry, Ninšubur, I have just the thing to bring Inanna back. We won’t leave her long in the netherworld.” Thus speaking, Enki removed a bit of dirt from his fingernail. From this dirt, he made the kur-ĝara, to whom he gave the life-restoring plant. He removed a bit of dirt from another fingernail, and from this he fashioned the gala-tura, to whom he gave the life-restoring water.

Enki spoke now to the kur-ĝara and the gala-tura. “Listen, you! This is important. If you fail to follow my instructions, I will un-create you – mark my words! Mistress Inanna has gone to the underworld. She hangs now from a hook in Ereškigala’s bedchamber, like a slab of meat or a mourning wreath. We won’t leave

Inanna to rot in the netherworld! You must go there at once. Like the mists that ride the marsh waters at morning, rise above the seven gates that guard the great below. Slip over the underworld gates like ghosts, like stealthy robbers on a moonless night. Go to the new mother, Ereškigala. She is there, nursing her twin children, cooing and groaning in turns. Speak with her, comfort her. She will offer you many things in return. Accept nothing save the corpse that hangs, rotting, against the wall. Sprinkle on it the life-restoring plant, the life-restoring water. This will bring Inanna back. Got it? Good. Now, off you go!”

Off they went, the kur-ĝara and the gala-tura. Like stealthy robbers they scaled the underworld gates; like ghosts they whispered past the seven demon-guarded doors. They found the new mother, the netherworld queen, who lay cooing and groaning in her bed, with a babe at each breast and the corpse of her sister hanging from a hook on the wall.

“Hello, lovely mother,” said the kur-ĝara. “Such beautiful children you have there.” Ereškigala beamed. “Did it hurt much?” asked the gala-tura, whose eyes had wandered to the pile of bloody towels that spilled from the queen’s laundry bin. “Oh, you can’t begin to imagine!” Ereškigala groaned. “Don’t you have children of your own?” The kur-ĝara and the gala-tura laughed. “We are neither man nor woman,” said the gala-tura. “Mothers we can never be.”

They spent a pleasant evening speaking with the underworld queen, comforting her. (Enki’s newborn creatures were quite the pair of boundary-bridging diplomats!)

At last Ereškigala said, “Well, boys, (or whatever it is you are), I’m beat! I must get some rest. It has been a true pleasure. Surely there must be something I can offer you before you go? A clear, flowing river, perhaps? Or a field of ripened grain?”

“My lady,” said the gala-tura, “your generosity is touching.” “Yes,” agreed the kur-ĝara. “We are honored.” “We ask for nothing,” continued the gala-tura, “save the hook-hung corpse that rots against your wall.” Ereškigala smiled. “That is the body of your queen, Inanna, my sister. You may take it.” The kur-ĝara and the gala-tura thanked her. They unhooked Inanna from the wall and sprinkled her with the life-restoring plant; they dabbed at her face with the life-restoring water. She returned at once to life. The seven divine powers were restored to Inanna, and she prepared to leave the underworld, accompanied by her kur-ĝara and her gala-tura.

“Oh, there’s just one thing, Inanna,” yawned the dark queen from her bed. “Someone must take your place in the city of death. My demons will escort you to the upper world. I’m sure a suitable replacement can be found there.” Inanna shrugged. She was just happy to be returning home at last. Dying had added nothing to her territorial holdings, and it had done even less for her complexion. She was eager for nothing so much as a long, hot soak in the tub.

As they ascended from that nether place, which seldom coughs up its much-treasured dead, Ninšubur ran to greet Inanna. The minister had accompanied the kur-ĝara and the gala-tura to the outermost gate of the underworld, where she had waited alone for Inanna’s return. Still wearing a coarse, dirt-encrusted garment, filthy,

exhausted, and covered in her own blood, the tear-stained Ninšubur looked as if she, too, had just spent three full days in that dark city from which the goddess was now returning. Inanna embraced her minister. At once the small demons twined themselves, snake-like, around Ninšubur's ankles. As she fell, the large demons, each taller than a fence post, encircled her and prepared to carry her back to the underworld. "This one will do, goddess. She looks half dead already, should fit right in."

The kur-ĝara and the gala-tura both burst into tears. Inanna waggled her lapis lazuli scepter at the large demons, who held Ninšubur like a frightened sheep in a wicker pen. "Stop it, you lunatics! You can't take *her* back with you. She is my favorite minister. When I was dead, she wept at the ruin mounds. She beat a drum and ran about in those stinking rags. She lacerated herself for me (Look, the cuts yet bleed!) and went alone to the gods' houses, lamenting. You're not taking her; find someone else."

So the demons let go of Ninšubur and the party continued on in search of a suitable substitute for Inanna. The minister glared at the demons and would make friends with none, despite their attempts to cheer her up. (Would *you* trust someone who had just tried to kill you?) At last they arrived in Umma, Šara's city. The singer threw himself at Inanna's feet. "Oh, Inanna! Thank Enki, you're back! I've spent *days* crying in the dirt, dressed in these stinking rags. I've been a mess worrying about you. Look, my cuts yet bleed!"

At once the small demons twined themselves, like creeping vines, around Šara's ankles. He stumbled into one of the larger demons, who bound his arms and legs with

twine and prepared to carry him back to the underworld. Once more, Inanna protested. "Šara is my singer. He is also my manicurist and my hairdresser. I have spent three days hanging, unwashed, on a rusty hook in my weird sister's boudoir. Do you really think I can afford to live without Šara's cosmetic ministrations at a time such as this? Let him go. We will find someone else."

So the demons let go of Šara and the party continued on in search of a suitable substitute for Inanna. Ninšubur continued to stare at the demons (who were actually kind of cute, when they weren't trying to kill you) and Šara remarked that Inanna could sure use a haircut. At last they arrived in Bad-tibira, Lulal's city. The priest was perched atop a mound of dirt, dressed in a single, ragged garment. In his left hand he held a drum. Upon his thin arms he had carved a bloody record of his recent grief; his face, too, was incised with the marks of lamentation. He knelt before the risen goddess and wept, now for joy. As if on cue, the small demons fastened themselves to his ankles, like briars; the large demons hefted the priest above their heads and prepared to carry him back to the underworld. Once more, Inanna intervened. "My priest? Are you mad? You're not taking my priest. Put him down. We'll find someone else." So the demons let go of Lulal and the party continued on in search of a suitable substitute for Inanna.

"I smell apples," said Šara. They had been walking for many miles and everyone was exhausted. Ninšubur, now feeling sorry for the small demons with their short little legs like knotted reeds, was carrying the lot of them in a little wicker basket that Lulal

had fetched from his house for this very purpose. As they traveled further along the plain of Kulaba, the apple smell grew more pronounced. At last they came upon the great tree. Beneath this tree sat Dumuzi (the handsome bastard), chomping on an apple and looking just as pleased as pie. "Hello, my love," he said to Inanna, his wife. "I trust you've been well."

Inanna did not smile. Inanna did not speak. She merely observed her husband, as a painter might study a face she wishes to capture in portrait to determine by which medium her artistic purposes would best be served. "Oil or water?," she asked, turning now to Ninšubur. "Should I have him boiled in hot oil, or should we simply drown him?" The minister was not accustomed to being consulted on such matters. "My Lady! He is your husband!"

"Inanna," interjected Dumuzi, "I am your husband!" The goddess walked now to stand beside him. With these last words the god-shepherd had stepped down from his intricately-carved throne, which was piled high with soft, colorful cushions. (Surely there is some sort of ego dysfunction at work in a shepherd-god who insists upon enjoying his apples whilst magnificently enthroned beneath the tree that bore them?) A basket of sweet, ripe apples sat on a pedestal within easy reach of the throne. Dumuzi's dress was impeccable, his robes of the finest quality. He wore his most priceless gems, as on a feast day. His fair skin was smooth and clean. (He had shaved that morning with great care, to avoid the little nicks and cuts that might result from a careless slip of the razor.) He had clearly taken great pains with his coal-black hair; the perfumed



ringlets twirled about his face and bounced against his shoulders as he spoke. "I am your husband," he repeated once more. "You love me."

"Take him away," Inanna commanded. At once the large demons, each taller than a fence post, encircled Dumuzi and prepared to carry him off to the underworld. The smaller demons sunk their tiny fangs in the soft flesh of Dumuzi's ankles. (Though not before bidding a tearful farewell to their lovely friend Ninšubur.) As he fell, the larger demons restrained him, like a weakened bull in a wicker pen. Dumuzi was carried, screaming and weeping, across the vast Kulaban plain to take Inanna's place in the netherworld, which seldom gives up its much-treasured dead.

Dumuzi's screams echoed far across the plain; long after his form had vanished in the distance, his cries could still be heard. Holy Inanna sunk to her knees beneath the great apple tree. She buried her face in the soft, colorful cushions of Dumuzi's magnificent throne, and wept bitterly for her husband.

## *Inanna's Descent, Explanatory Note*

At this point, the reader may be wondering: *Why, pray tell, have you allowed a lengthy Sumerian "fairytale" to take up residence in the midst of your essay?* Recall, if you will (if you can; so many words have passed since then), my claim that Inanna's story contains within itself all of the themes that this essay has thus far addressed. Perhaps, while we were escorting Inanna through the underworld's seven gates and then bringing her to life once more, the themes themselves were lost within the story. Let us dig them out once more and lay them upon the table (or rather, the page) for further inspection.

***Lament:*** The story of Inanna's descent into death and her subsequent resurrection provides us with a narrative framework through which to observe, not only the importance of the lamenter's art in Sumerian culture, but also the specific ritual activities that such lamenting may have entailed. Ninšubur, Šara, and Lulal all perform a pre-determined set of actions: they dress in rags; they wail and beat a drum; they wallow about in the dirt; they self-lacerate. Such actions seem deliberately designed to remove the lamenter from the comforts of everyday life and thus thrust her/him into a sort of liminal state, where pain and discomfort are embraced.<sup>93</sup>

***Gender:*** Inanna, although she is a goddess, is also a female. Throughout the Sumerian myth she is referred to as a "girl." Yet this divine girl-woman, not content to sit at home quietly, weaving, or cooking, or tending to her children, instead sets off in

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<sup>93</sup> The self-laceration, in particular, interests me. Is this an externalization of grief, or a means of releasing or relieving one sort of pain (e.g. emotional or psychological) by deliberately causing pain of a different nature (e.g. physical)?

conquest of something that is, even for a goddess, it seems, impossible to obtain. Even when she returns from the underworld, it is Inanna, and not the netherworld retinue that accompanies her, who ultimately determines who will serve as her substitute in death. She is determined, decisive, and ambitious, not meek, or obedient, or content to remain quietly where circumstances have placed her. Millennia before Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Inanna, it seems, wished to claim all "rooms" for her own use. Ninšubur, too, exhibits courage and initiative; note that it is she, and not Šara or Lulal, who approaches the gods and ultimately secures the means of Inanna's release from the underworld. The kur-ĝara and the gala-tura, Enki's androgynous creations, also raise this issue of gender. They are neither male nor female. The myth as it is recorded in the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian literature seems to imply that their androgynous status somehow renders them particularly well-suited to breach the underworld gates and restore Inanna to life. Just as Inanna's cultic personnel, the transgendered gala, are viewed as being well-placed to communicate with the realm of the gods because they have already breached the gender divide, so, too, do the non-gendered kur-ĝara and gala-tura demonstrate their ability to bridge the gap between the world of the living and that of the dead.

*Transgression:* Inanna deliberately and defiantly transgresses a boundary that is not to be crossed, that between the living and the dead. She does this not once, but twice. She enters the realm of death, alive; she leaves the realm of death, alive. To enter where only the dead may go is a transgression; to then resurrect, to leave that place

where the dead must remain, is yet another transgression of the boundary between life and death. The kur-ĝara and gala-tura also twice transgress this boundary.

Turning now to transgression of a different sort, consider poor Dumuzi. Because his failure to observe the proper rites of lamentation transgresses the dictates or customs of mourning, he is made to pay with his life. *Woe to Dumuzi, for he has sinned.*

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## The Weeping Goddess

The story of Inanna's descent ends with the goddess weeping bitterly over the husband she has *lost*. "One of the more striking motifs in the Mesopotamian laments is what [Samuel Noah] Kramer calls 'the weeping goddess.'"<sup>94</sup> In many Sumerian songs of lament, a goddess weeps and bemoans her city's fate. "Ninisina, the mother of the Land, wept bitter tears. 'Alas, the destroyed city, my destroyed house,' she cried bitterly."<sup>95</sup> Often in these laments we also find the goddess pleading "with either her divine spouse or Enlil or the council of gods to show mercy and relent."<sup>96</sup> Thus laments Ningal, patroness of Urim, as she stands helpless before the destruction of a beloved city and its people: "'Truly I shed my tears before An. Truly I myself made supplication to Enlil. *Let not my city be destroyed*, I implored them. *Let not Urim be destroyed*, I implored them. *Let not its people perish*, I implored them. But An did not change that word. Enlil did not soothe my heart."<sup>97</sup>

The goddess Ningal is often associated with marsh reeds in Sumerian mythology. She is a daughter of the trickster-god Enki and consort to Nanna, the moon god. Like her daughter, Inanna, Ningal is an oft-appearing character in Sumerian poems of lament. As the marsh reeds sigh and moan in the wind, so, too, does the goddess of the marsh reeds weep and sing as the destroying storm overtakes her city:

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<sup>94</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, 75

<sup>95</sup> *The lament for Sumer and Urim*, ETCSL. Ninisina: titular goddess of the Sumerian city, Isin

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *The lament for Urim*, ETCSL.

The good woman, to disquiet the lord concerning his city, Ningal, to give him no rest concerning his Land, approached him for the sake of his city -- bitterly she weeps. She approached the lord for the sake of his house -- bitterly she weeps. She approached him for the sake of his devastated city -- bitterly she weeps. She approached him for the sake of his devastated house -- before him she makes its bitter lament.

The woman, after she had composed her song(?) for the tearful balaĝ instrument, herself utters softly a lamentation for the silent house: "The storm that came to be -- its lamentation hangs heavy on me. Raging about because of the storm, I am the woman for whom the storm came to be. The storm that came to be -- its lamentation hangs heavy on me."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> *ibid.* The "good woman" - e.g. Ningal - here composes a lament to sing before her "lord" - e.g. Nanna. The balaĝ is thought to have been a drum, and this instrument was apparently used often enough in the performance of Sumerian laments to give its name to a particular form of lament, the balag-eršemma. The word eršemma is probably derived from the "shem" drum, another type of instrument used in the performance of laments. See Gwaltney.

## The weeping goddess of Judah<sup>99</sup>

“Since biblical Yahwism did not tolerate the worship of deities other than Yahweh, one would not expect to find a literal importation of the weeping goddess motif into Lamentations. Rather, the Israelite poet would have had to find a viable substitute for this dominant image.”<sup>100</sup> Thus we find the personified Zion, “Virgin Daughter Judah,” weeping for her destroyed city, Jerusalem:

<sup>15</sup> “The Lord has rejected  
all the warriors in my midst;  
he has summoned an army against me  
to crush my young men.  
In his winepress the Lord has trampled  
Virgin Daughter Judah.

<sup>16</sup> “This is why I weep  
and my eyes overflow with tears.  
No one is near to comfort me,  
no one to restore my spirit.  
My children are destitute  
because the enemy has prevailed.”

<sup>17</sup> Zion stretches out her hands,  
but there is no one to comfort her.<sup>101</sup>

Throughout the five poems of Lamentations, Lady Jerusalem assumes the role of the weeping goddess. “Bitterly she weeps at night, / tears are on her cheeks.”<sup>102</sup> The personified city is “desolate” and “in bitter anguish.”<sup>103</sup> Her “groans are many,” and her “heart is faint.”<sup>104</sup> Like the goddesses of the Sumerian laments, “Virgin Daughter Judah” lays her troubles before the god who is responsible for her city’s destruction.

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<sup>99</sup> For further discussion of this motif in Lamentations and other Hebraic scriptures, see Dobbs-Allsopp.

<sup>100</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, 77

<sup>101</sup> Lamentations 1:15-17 (NIV)

<sup>102</sup> Lamentations 1:2 (NIV)

<sup>103</sup> Lamentations 1:8; Lamentations 1:13; Lamentations 1:4 (NIV)

<sup>104</sup> Lamentations 1:22 (NIV)

<sup>20</sup> "See, LORD, how distressed I am!  
I am in torment within,  
and in my heart I am disturbed,  
for I have been most rebellious.  
Outside, the sword bereaves;  
inside, there is only death.

<sup>21</sup> "People have heard my groaning,  
but there is no one to comfort me."<sup>105</sup>

There is one key difference, however. In the city-laments of Sumer the weeping goddess does not herself accept blame for the city's destruction. She may implore the destroying gods to relent, and she may plead on behalf of a city and its people, but she will never claim responsibility for "The storm that came to be." Jerusalem, on the other hand, is a guilt-torn "goddess." Despite her recognition that "The Lord is like an enemy [who] has swallowed up Israel,"<sup>106</sup> she insists that such treatment is warranted, citing her own rebellion, her inability to follow her Lord's commands. "I have been most rebellious" is a common refrain throughout Lamentations. "'The LORD is righteous, / yet I rebelled against his command.'"<sup>107</sup> The poets of Lamentations insist upon "the LORD's great love" and his unfailing compassion,<sup>108</sup> despite the five poems' many indications that he is neither loving nor compassionate (nor particularly attentive; he sticks around just long enough to wreck the rented room, and then sneaks off without paying).

Judah weeps because she has transgressed the laws of her god; neither the rightness of these laws nor the righteousness of the god who has imposed them is

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<sup>105</sup> Lamentations 1:20-21 (NIV)

<sup>106</sup> Lamentations 2:5 (NIV)

<sup>107</sup> Lamentations 1:18 (NIV)

<sup>108</sup> Lamentations 3:22 (NIV)



questioned. Throughout, Jerusalem's tears are mingled with Yahweh's stony silence. (Alas for weeping Judah that she may not somehow redirect her tears to Enki, for surely he would grant the succor that Yahweh in his wrath has refused.) Despite the poems' many vivid descriptions of god-inflicted abuse, the personified city-victim always finds a way to appropriate the blame for such mistreatment. Like a battered woman who remains enamored of her abuser, downtrodden Jerusalem continues to adore the god who destroys her.

*Inanna, Queen of Heaven, I'd like you to meet Jerusalem, Yahweh's downtrodden bride*

Continuing with the "weeping goddess" motif and returning once more to the lovely, headstrong Inanna, let us revisit the dying-rising goddess's "private lament"<sup>109</sup> for her lost Dumuzi, which is included in many Sumerian poems of lamentation:

A lament was raised in the city:

"My Lady weeps bitterly for her young husband.  
Inanna weeps bitterly for her young husband.  
Woe for her husband! Woe for her young love!  
Woe for her house! Woe for her city!"<sup>110</sup>

Lamentations contains its own widow's lament, as Jerusalem, too, is given the role of bereaved widow:

<sup>1</sup> How deserted lies the city,  
once so full of people!  
How like a widow is she,  
who once was great among the nations!  
She who was queen among the provinces  
has now become a slave.

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<sup>109</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, 76

<sup>110</sup> Wolkstein and Kramer, 85

<sup>2</sup> Bitterly she weeps at night,  
tears are on her cheeks.<sup>111</sup>

If the myth of the goddess's descent to the netherworld is to be our measure in such matters, then Inanna is responsible for her husband's death. Jerusalem also fancies herself a self-made widow.<sup>112</sup> At least, this is how the poets present her widowed state. In Lamentations, the city-bride's downfall and attendant bereavement result from her own disobedience; her present, pitiable state, which the poet likens to widowhood, is the result of her oft-cited rebellion. "The LORD has brought her grief / because of her many sins."<sup>113</sup>

Just as Dumuzi has been snatched (or rather, dispatched) from the world of the living, so, too, has Yahweh departed from his once-beloved city and its people; thus, Yahweh's silence throughout the 5 poems of Lamentations can be likened to Dumuzi's sojourn in the underworld. "You wrapped yourself in a cloud/which prayer could not pierce."<sup>114</sup>

Interestingly, Inanna, who consigned her husband to a shadowy netherworld existence with a "look of death" and a "Take him away,"<sup>115</sup> gives no indication that she acknowledges or recognizes the causative relationship between this action and her

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<sup>111</sup> Lamentations 1:1-2 (NIV)

<sup>112</sup> I wonder, which is worse: to refuse to own one's guilt, or to insist upon purchasing the guilt of another, regardless of the cost?

<sup>113</sup> Lamentations 1:5 (NIV)

<sup>114</sup> Lamentations 3:44 (NAB)

<sup>115</sup> *Inanna's descent to the nether world*: "They followed her to the great apple tree in the plain of Kulaba. There was Dumuzid clothed in a magnificent garment and seated magnificently on a throne. The demons seized him there by his thighs...She looked at him, it was the look of death. She spoke to him (?), it was the speech of anger. She shouted at him (?), it was the shout of heavy guilt: 'How much longer? Take him away.' Holy Inana gave Dumuzid the shepherd into their hands." ETCSL

subsequent bereavement. (In one breath, she kills him; a mere twenty lines later we find the goddess weeping over his loss. Go figure.)

Meanwhile, Jerusalem, who hardly seems to warrant the treatment she has received from an ostensibly loving god(husband), nevertheless mourns his absence-in-silence as if she herself has somehow cast him off into some sort of hellish oblivion. Inanna may weep for the loss of Dumuzi, but Jerusalem weeps, not only for her “widowhood,” but also because she believes that “she” is to blame for her “husband’s” vanishment. Because she insists upon blaming herself for her Lord’s departure, Yahweh’s once-lustrous city-bride finds his withdrawal all the more difficult to bear. “Woe to us, for we have sinned!”<sup>116</sup>

Because she has “been most rebellious,” the “widowed” city-bride is made to suffer both pain and humiliation. ““People have heard my groaning,/but there is no one to comfort me./All my enemies have heard of my distress;/they rejoice at what you have done.””<sup>117</sup> Yahweh treats his once beloved “bride” as a beast of burden:

<sup>14</sup> “My sins have been bound into a yoke;  
by his hands they were woven together.  
They have been hung on my neck,  
and the Lord has sapped my strength.  
He has given me into the hands  
of those I cannot withstand.”<sup>118</sup>

Like a troublesome draft animal that is but half broken, Jerusalem must be “bound into a yoke” and fully subdued by the enemies Yahweh has appointed to this task. (The invading Babylonians, then, are like farmhands recruited to bring order to a

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<sup>116</sup> Lamentations 5:16 (NIV)

<sup>117</sup> Lamentations 1:21 (NIV)

<sup>118</sup> Lamentations 1:14 (NIV)

wealthy gentleman's estate.) Beyond its meaning as a device used to fasten a beast to a plow, another sense of this word, *yoke* – “To join, link, couple, connect, associate,” – suggests that Jerusalem, the city-bride whom the Lord has forsaken, will now, instead, be joined, or wedded, to the sins with which she betrayed him. Yet another connotation of this word – “To bring into or hold in subjection or servitude; to subjugate, oppress”<sup>119</sup> – suggests that this new union is one of subjection: in place of a wedding ring, or fine bridal jewels, Judah, now wedded to her transgressions, will have a collar placed around her neck.

Beyond the theme of widowhood, Jerusalem has more in common with Inanna than one might expect. Throughout the five poems of Lamentations, Jerusalem, much like Inanna in her descent to the Underworld, is stripped of all that has heretofore defined her.<sup>120</sup> At the underworld's first gate, Inanna's crown is removed. Likewise, the Judean poet laments: “The crown has fallen from our head.”<sup>121</sup>

Just as Inanna is made to relinquish her lapis lazuli necklace in order to pass through the second gate, Jerusalem must part with her “princes whiter than snow,/and whiter than milk,/their bodies more ruddy than rubies,/their appearance like lapis lazuli.”<sup>122</sup> As she passes the third gate, Inanna's egg-shaped beads are taken from her

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<sup>119</sup> "yoke, n.1". OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/232053?rskey=15VJ9M&result=1> (accessed April 10, 2012).

<sup>120</sup> The possibility of making this correlation first struck me as I read Wolkstein's "Introduction," xv-xix

<sup>121</sup> Lamentations 5:16 (NIV)

<sup>122</sup> Lamentations 4:7 (NIV)

breast; so, too, are Judah's "sacred gems...scattered/at every street corner."<sup>123</sup> Inanna's breastplate, a symbol of her status as a warrior, a goddess of battle, is removed at the underworld's fourth gate; Judah, too, sees her military strength weakened: "The Lord has rejected/all the warriors in my midst."<sup>124</sup>

As she passes the netherworld's fifth gate, Inanna's ring of gold is slipped from her finger. Likewise, Jerusalem's "gold has lost its luster,/the fine gold become dull," as "the precious children of Zion,/once their weight in gold,/are now considered as pots of clay,/the work of a potter's hands!"<sup>125</sup> At the sixth gate, Inanna's lapis lazuli scepter, a symbol of royalty, a mark of her power, is snatched from her hand. Similarly, Judah's "king and her princes are exiled among the nations,"<sup>126</sup> and "She who was queen among the provinces/has now become a slave."<sup>127</sup>

At the seventh and final gate to the underworld, Inanna is stripped of her royal robe and forced to enter the netherworld throne room naked and bowed. Jerusalem, too, is stripped of her "splendor,"<sup>128</sup> humiliated, as "All who honored her despise her,/for they have seen her naked; she herself groans/and turns away."<sup>129</sup>

At the darkest moment of her descent, Inanna is killed, her corpse hung upon the wall. Jerusalem, however, is not allowed to die. Instead, she is raped. "The enemy laid

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<sup>123</sup> Lamentations 4:1 (NIV) Inanna's "egg-shaped beads" are more than a pretty adornment; these represent one of the seven divine powers. Likewise, Zion's scattered gems are something more than treasure: the people have been displaced, scattered, thrown from their homes like precious jewels casually dropped in the gutter.

<sup>124</sup> Lamentations 1:15 (NIV)

<sup>125</sup> Lamentations 4: 1-2 (NIV)

<sup>126</sup> Lamentations 2:9 (NIV)

<sup>127</sup> Lamentations 1:1 (NIV)

<sup>128</sup> Lamentations 1:6 (NIV)

<sup>129</sup> Lamentations 1:8 (NIV)

hands/on all her treasures;/she saw pagan nations/enter her sanctuary."<sup>130</sup> Likewise, her "daughters": "Women have been violated in Zion,/and virgins in the towns of Judah."<sup>131</sup>

How does one conclude when writing of such things? The Sumerian songs to Inanna usually end with something like: "Because you are unmatched among the Great Princes, maiden Inanna, praising you is magnificent!"<sup>132</sup> Somehow, magically, things always seem to work out for Inanna. Alas, for Violated Daughter Judah, her circumstances are in no way magnificent. The biblical poets have composed both hymns and laments for fair, oft-fallen Jerusalem, "the splendor of Israel."<sup>133</sup> So, too, did the priest(ess)-poets of *Shinar* compose countless songs and hymns to Inanna. I have nothing of worth to add to either collection - no suitable honorary offering, no beautiful words. In the absence of words, would not a moment of silence serve equally well?

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<sup>130</sup> Lamentations 1:10 (NIV)

<sup>131</sup> Lamentations 5:11 (NIV)

<sup>132</sup> *Inana and An*, ETCSL

<sup>133</sup> Lamentations 2:1 (NIV)

## Conclusion

No, this will not do. I am, I suppose, obligated to provide some sort of conclusion after such a long, meandering *journey* in words; this is, after all, an (ostensibly) *academic* paper. Therefore, I will provide a summary of sorts, a brief catalog, perhaps, of what I have written. I will make my point/s.

In this essay, I have provided a juxtaposition of the biblical Lamentations alongside the older Sumerian laments; because they are kin, I have brought them together for a family reunion of sorts. Certainly, there have been many other reunions over the years, but I wished to see what would happen if I hosted one myself.

Beyond an exploration of the literary and thematic similarities that Lamentations shares with its ancient Sumerian predecessors, I have also provided a discussion of the role that gender has played in such expressions of suffering. From the observation that, across cultures, the lamenter's role is (more often than not) assumed by women; to a presentation of the goddess Inanna's gender-bending lamenters as they appear in both myth and ritual; to a brief analysis of the Hebrew poets' adoption of a female voice, or perspective, in the biblical Lamentations: I have shown some of the ways in which gender and lament are intimately and intricately connected.

I have also presented the reader with various instances of what I have chosen to term *transgression*. We have watched as Inanna, along with her cultic and mythic "entourage," transgressed the boundary that separates life from death, as well as the boundaries that define generally accepted, or biologically (pre-)determined, gender

roles. The Hebrew poets, too, have provided us with an example of poetic transgending, which may be viewed as transgressive in-and-of itself, in the sense that it takes them beyond or outside of their own “male” experience, and which, I have argued, also served as a means whereby they could express sentiments that might be viewed as transgressive within the framework of their broader theological outlook. Speaking of transgression as “sin,” we have witnessed Zion lamenting the transgressions that the biblical writers tell us led to her fall: *Woe to us, for we have sinned*. We have also watched as Inanna’s husband, the luckless Dumuzi, is carted off to the underworld for his failure to observe the rites of lamentation, a failure which transgresses proper, or accepted, Sumerian mourning customs and which, perhaps, represented an offense to what this culture believed in terms of what is owed to the dead.

Finally, I have provided a meeting of sorts between the goddess Inanna and the variously-personified Mother Zion, or Virgin Daughter Judah, or Lady Jerusalem. As we have seen, the two share something in common, even beyond the motif of a distressed, or weeping, “goddess.” In both Inanna’s descent and Jerusalem’s fall, each is stripped of her own empowering identity. Whereas Inanna’s journey through the seven gates of the underworld presents an ordered, sequential removal of the attributes that constitute her divine power, Jerusalem’s fall represents the chaotic despoilment of a city besieged. It is the aftermath of the city’s fall that we see in Lamentations.



The city-lament genre serves as a means for the poet, or priest, or performer, to express the suffering, the sorrow, of the broader community. I have returned, as a reader, to the biblical Lamentations repeatedly throughout these past months, and the impression with which I am left is one of the impossibility of containing such sorrow within an ordered poetic framework. The Sumerian laments, as well, attempt to impose an artificial order upon suffering. I suppose that any attempt to bind suffering with art, or even to articulate suffering in words, will somehow fall short. This is not to say that these attempts do not result in beautiful expressions of grief and pain, but only to point to the impossibility of ever fully expressing the *reality* of such suffering.<sup>134</sup> These laments do, however, provide a means of preserving the *memories* of such suffering; thus, the ancient, unnamed dead are not disregarded, and the god-fashioned<sup>135</sup> havoc that wrecks both cities and lives, however remote in distance and time, does not pass unobserved.

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<sup>134</sup> Perhaps this is why music has traditionally played such an important role in rituals of lament. It seems to me that there are certain feelings that music can evoke, which words can only tell of or hint at.

<sup>135</sup> This is not an authorial statement of belief in angry god/s, past or present. The lament texts themselves place responsibility for the city's destruction with the gods, and so I have approached these texts in this context.

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