

from modern methods, such as sociological and literary criticism.” Susan Niditch amply succeeds in this commitment.

Lisbeth S. Fried
University of Michigan



Yael Shemesh. *Mourning in the Bible: Coping with Loss in Biblical Literature*. Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me’uḥad, 2015. 424 pp. (Hebrew).
doi:10.1017/S0364009416000490

This book is devoted to the survey of a universal phenomenon: mourning, and the reaction to the loss of a close one. Death being an integral part of life, normative conventions and rituals have evolved in every society alongside individual, personal grief.

Yael Shemesh explores the broad range of reactions to death found in the Bible, and throughout her book, she incorporates alternative reactions from Near Eastern cultures and the ancient world in general. A fascinating picture emerges: on one hand, common modes of expression are universal, and transcend cultural differences; while on the other, each culture forms its own model of mourning in relation to its own religious and cultural world. Mourning in the Bible bears certain resemblances to mourning customs in the ancient world, but differs in other respects. For example, as ancient Egyptians believed that a person continues to exist in a certain form even after death—and that this form requires food—a significant portion of death rites and rituals were concerned with the task of preserving the body and interring it with forms of sustenance. As no such beliefs are found in the Bible, the biblical text does not contain any recurring motifs of embalming or provision of food for the dead.

The book opens with Israel’s perception of death during the biblical era, and the ways it mitigates the harsh finality death brings in its wake. In contrast to the accepted position in research, which perceives death in the Bible as something final and absolute (see, for example, Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought* [Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997], 59), Shemesh posits that echoes of the idea of existence following death can be found in the Bible. As she argues, “[t]he belief in the continuation of existence after death is almost universal; it would be remarkable, were it to emerge that [this belief] had passed over the nation of Israel during the biblical era” (33). Through this paradigm, Shemesh explores the biblical notion of the deceased’s reunion with his family (“gathered to his ancestors”); in her opinion, this expresses not only the collective gathering of bones, but also the reunion of souls (33–35). At the same time, Shemesh notes other methods that alleviate the notion of death’s finality, such as the perception of descendants as an alternative for immortality (27–29).

After a discussion of the perception of death in itself, Shemesh explores mourning customs in the Bible; this, too, is conducted in comparison to ancient Near Eastern cultural conventions. In this context, she addresses the accepted duration of mourning periods, as well as the accepted practices of dealing with the body. Shemesh believes that the purpose of mourning customs is threefold: they allow the mourners to express their pain and grief; they give form to the community's identification with the mourner's sorrow; and some customs are even geared towards the actual needs of the deceased.

The book's third chapter is devoted to circles of mourning: who the mourners are, and whom they mourn. It emerges that mourning in the Bible is not restricted to mourning over family members; it is possible to identify national collective mourning over the death of a leader (for example, Aaron's death in Numbers 20:29), as well as mourning over the death of a friend. (This is not developed in the Bible, in contrast to the central role this category plays in the Epic of Gilgamesh.)

Based on her earlier discussion concerning ancient Israelite attitudes towards death, the fourth chapter explores ways of dealing with loss in biblical literature. Shemesh presents facets of the topic documented in ancient Near Eastern literature that are not manifest in biblical literature, such as the denial of death, which is documented in other cultures but is difficult to trace in the Bible (although Shemesh debates whether the Shunammite woman's reaction to her son's death in 2 Kings 4 can be considered denial, p. 160). There are various reactions to death throughout the Bible: Shemesh traces anger (the widow of Zarephath's reaction to her son's death in 1 Kings 17), blood vengeance (Shemesh interprets David's order to have Joab killed in 1 Kings 2 as a deferred act of revenge for Absalom's death.), depression (as exhibited by David over Absalom's death, and by Jacob when he believed Joseph had been killed by a wild animal), and acceptance (David following the death of Bathsheba's infant, and Job). Extensive discussions are devoted to the biblical instances where characters seek to produce a substitute for the deceased (whether to compensate for the loss of a son, such as the birth of Seth after Abel's death, or to compensate for the loss of a dead parent, such as Isaac's marriage to Rebecca, which Genesis 24:67 portrays as consolation for his mother's death), as well as various attempts to perpetuate the memory of the dead (187–99).

The fifth chapter analyzes episodes in which an expression of mourning is anticipated, but is nonetheless absent. Sometimes the reason for this omission is self-evident, and no narrative space is devoted to the cause (Shemesh points out that Abigail does not mourn Nabal the Carmelite.), but sometimes the lack of mourning plays a role within a narrative or prophecy. Jeremiah prophesies about sinful king Jehoiakim: "They will not mourn for him: 'Alas, my brother! Alas, my sister!'" (Jeremiah 22:19), and Jeremiah and Ezekiel are commanded not to mourn in order to convey what will befall the people (Jeremiah 16; Ezekiel 24).

In chapter 6 Shemesh takes a look at the role of women in mourning rites and rituals in the ancient Near East and the Bible, and in the final two chapters of the book, her strong literary skills are evident in her analysis of two narratives

related to mourning and bereavement—the David narratives (which “more than any other literary unit in the Bible, provide an extensive, comprehensive range of information regarding all that pertains to mourning”), and the story of Rizpah, Saul’s concubine (2 Samuel 21). Shemesh points out the tension between the public and private contexts of death in the David narrative. David himself is torn between these two dimensions, and this is reflected in the narrative. Shemesh perceives Rizpah’s story as an expression of a mother’s total devotion to the protection of her sons’ bodies, despite extreme conditions of physical and emotional discomfort. In a meticulous, convincing analysis, Shemesh concludes that God eventually capitulates on account of both David and Rizpah’s actions; even though Rizpah acted for her own personal reasons, she effectively spurred David to action, bringing about the famine’s end.

This study presents a broad, rich perspective: its pages are brimming with biblical and extrabiblical examples, drawing on textual and anthropological examples taken from dozens of cultures across a range of time periods from the ancient Near East onward. This creates a vast, diverse tapestry of concepts of death and reactions to it. A study that engages with texts about death and mourning is constantly required to differentiate between texts that document a set ritual and texts that reflect a spontaneous reaction to death. Shemesh is aware of this distinction, and sometimes openly deliberates about the nature of certain episodes. (See, for example, her discussion of purposeless wandering, pp. 118–20.) Other instances are also subject to this debate, such as the documentation of weeping at funerals (67); some might claim that this reflects spontaneous exhibition of emotion, while there may be room to assert the opposite. Thus she notes throughout the book that in every culture people learn to express their grief through formal ritual, which allows them to channel their emotions and express their pain publicly. This allows them to convey their sorrow within the boundaries of social convention, thus providing them with support and encouragement.

Mourning in the Bible makes an important contribution to biblical research in general, illuminating biblical attitudes towards death in particular. Thanks to the rich collection of examples from other cultures threaded throughout the work, and the fact that Shemesh supports her discussion with psychological and anthropological studies, I have no doubt this work will also interest scholars in other fields. While the book is concerned with modes of mourning and ways of dealing with loss, a strong love of life emanates from its pages, as its moving closing line expresses: “Recognition of the journey’s end colors how we make our way along the journey” (350).

Jonathan Grossman
Bar-Ilan University

