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Infants cry. No matter the socioeconomic situation, geographical location, time period, or the color of the infant’s skin, infants everywhere cry. Bosworth explores this universal phenomenon by examining the intersection of biology and culture reflected in the ancient texts concerned with infants crying. In doing so he contributes to two growing bodies of scholarship: that which focuses on children in the ancient world, and that which “combines humanities scholarship and scientific research in an attempt to understand human beings and their cultural productions” (vii). The fact that children are an important, overlooked source of information about the ancient world is a statement that has been embraced in recent years, and the broader field of ancient Near Eastern studies has welcomed this newcomer to the table. The latter approach, combining humanities and the hard sciences, is one that has faced more resistance, so the book’s introduction opens with a defense of this approach.

The premise of chapter 1 is that infants cry to elicit a response from a caregiver. Because an infant could not be assured that the mother would care for it, crying evolved as an attachment behavior meant to maximize the odds that an adult would be motivated to care for the infant. Parental investment in an infant might have nothing to do with whether the parent loved the child and everything to do with whether the parent could
afford to care for it. Infants born into harsh socioeconomic situations may be abandoned or adopted out by their mothers, especially if an infant was weak or the last in a long line of siblings. Ultimately, the evolutionary goal of reproduction is not to have children but to have grandchildren. Based on this notion, Bosworth argues that the response to crying given by the adult plays a role in natural selection. Bosworth explores other ways in which infants successfully elicit care, such as being cute (physically), suckling, and smiling, but concludes that the most effective means is crying.

Chapter 1 sets the tone for the book and in doing so delves into the science of crying. The infant calls people to action by crying, which induces stress. The resulting actions can be positive (care) or negative (harm). While this is an important point, the factors driving a caregiver to respond are not clearly defined. For example, at one point Bosworth states that abuse is the fault of the abuser, such as poor problem-solving skills, poor parenting skills, social isolation, or negative religious beliefs—here he cites a Christian parenting manual that professes infants as sinful and in need of correction (20). However, within the scientific literature provided, discussion of other issues, such as postpartum depression, is curiously absent. Another area that could be expanded is what is meant by abuse. Bosworth mentions Shaken Baby Syndrome as a kind of repetitive abuse and an example of a negative response to crying. While SBS is universally understood as abuse, other reactions to crying not discussed, such as the “crying it out” technique, are murkier. Some see this as a form of child abuse, while others understand it as a way of teaching the infant to soothe itself. What is meant by abuse needs to be articulated more carefully.

After establishing the biological and evolutionary aspects of crying, Bosworth devotes the core of the book to analyzing Mesopotamian, biblical, and Greek sources that reference crying and abandonment. In addressing the Mesopotamian literature, discussed in chapter 2, he delves into the relationship between the Akkadian incantations and lullaby traditions. Like Walter Farber, Bosworth asserts that the baby incantations grew out of the lullaby tradition. To support his stance, he explores the cross-cultural research on lullabies. Here Bosworth begins to apply his dual approach combining science with the humanities in a dance showcasing sociology and literary criticism. He notes that people speak differently to infants, using a more musical or lilting voice; they use a kind of sing-song infant-directed speech. Adults alter the kind of song-speech directed at the infant between play songs and soothing lullaby song. Ironically, while lullabies are sung in a soothing voice, the words of lullabies often express hostility toward the infant. Bosworth demonstrates this ironic confluence through an analysis of the Spanish lullabies of Federico García Lorca and an analysis of forty-six Mesopotamian baby incantations. In comparing the Spanish lullabies to those of Mesopotamia, one finds a similarity between the sentiments spoken. The crying baby causes the parent stress: the parent is tired and has chores to finish. Out of desperation the parent threatens the baby with the impending
arrival of maleficent demons (representing death) who are drawn to the sound of the baby’s cries. The last third of the chapter switches gears to focus on the presence of crying infants in Mesopotamian creation narratives to point out the consequences of noise in the divine realm. Bosworth uses the narratives to counter scholars who dismiss the seriousness of baby incantations because of their relationship to lullabies.

Two observations stand out from this chapter. The first concerns the connection Bosworth draws between appearances of Ea in both the crying sections of the creation narratives and in the baby incantations. Bosworth highlights Ea’s dwelling place, the Apsu (which is represented by still or fresh water), literally as a deity put to sleep and symbolically as a place of slumber in the creation narratives. Then, in the incantations, he notes it is Ea who often provides spells for sleep so that he, Ea, can return to his place of rest, the Apsu (58). This connection helps demonstrate the role of the divine in both desiring quiet and actively causing crying to stop. Also noteworthy is the following statement concerning lullabies: “lullabies can describe hostility toward the child in part because the child does not understand the words. However, many lullabies continue to be sung to children well after they have out grown infancy and can understand the lyrics, and older siblings understand the lullabies sung to infants” (29). This statement is profound and begs for more analysis. On the one hand, one wonders what this statement says about the perceived status and value of the children hearing and understanding the lullaby. On the other hand, one wonders what the parents were thinking when they uttered such dark words in the presence of older children. Issues such as these await future scholarship.

Chapter 3 shifts to the Hebrew Bible (Exod 2:1–10; Gen 21:8–21; Ezek 16). Again, Bosworth draws from the sciences, this time pointing out that babies who are recognizably healthy are favored. Such babies are described as chubby and cute. Looking to Moses’s birth narrative, Bosworth provides a new reading wherein the appearance of baby Moses is emphasized. He reasons that Moses’s mother did not abandon him upon birth because she saw that he was “good” (MT) or “cute” (LXX). Moses’s pleasing appearance is highlighted again in the New Testament (Act 7:17–22; Heb 11:23) and by Philo (Mos. 1.2.9). Bosworth concludes that Moses’s viability, symbolized in his cute or good appearance, sparked a desire for his mother to keep him. He then moves on to discuss the role of crying and the response by Pharaoh’s daughter: she has pity on the crying infant. Bosworth notes that her reaction is paradigmatic; she feels the need to act (75). In his rereading of Exod 2, Bosworth argues that the women in the narrative are not the only ones responsible for saving Moses. His argument is in line with the burgeoning new field of child-centered readings: Moses has agency, he appears as the center of attention, he acts or looks good/cute, and he cries. Each of these things contributes to Moses’s salvation (77). The remaining two narratives in this chapter again address infant abandonment. In Gen 21 the role of crying is highlighted as a conduit to the divine ear. As in Mesopotamia,
in the Israelite tradition God is drawn to do something about the crying infant (Ishmael). Ezekiel 16, on the other hand, differentiates the Israelite God from those of Mesopotamia. In this narrative the abandoned infant does not weep, yet God is moved to rescue the infant.

Shifting to the Greek world, chapter 4 looks at narratives discussing infant abandonment by Herodotus (Cyrus), Pindar (Iamus), Sophocles (Oedipus), Euripides (Ion), and Diodorus of Sicily and (Pseudo-)Apollodorus (various). Many of the narratives share common elements (untimely conceptions, abandoned at birth, fed by animals, rescued and raised by shepherds/cow herders) and thus appear to create a literary type scene. The Mesopotamian and biblical abandonment stories include weeping at the point of abandonment; however, this element is curiously missing from the Greek narratives. Bosworth notes that weeping is a private emotion, one that some authors may have chosen to pass over in favor of more public emotions. He also looks to studies of Greek attitudes on birth control, abortion, and exposure and suggests that the act of abandonment itself created an emotional divide between the parent and child so that “the crying of the child may not have been regarded as sufficient reason to rescue it” (113). Here I find it difficult to impose this historic explanation on a carefully structured literary genre. Instead, I wonder if Bosworth’s observation that the narratives stress the viability of the infant via descriptions of its beauty and the fact that the infant grows up to be an important individual may offer a solution to the “missing” weeping. It might be that within Greek literature weeping was considered a manly act, reserved for grown heroes, such as is often noted with Odysseus. If so, then it goes to follow that, unlike their Mesopotamian and biblical counterparts, Greek authors played up the physical beauty, not the crying, of an infant as a means of pulling at the potential rescuer’s heartstrings. This could be an area for further exploration. Examining the narratives from the point of gender, one does not find the expected gender distribution; of the fifteen infant abandonment narratives, only two were female. Bosworth notes that historically more females were abandoned than males. Again, the appearance of males seems to be a literary construct, as most narratives are meant to impress upon the reader the divine favor bestowed upon the hero at birth; left to die, the hero-infant overcame all odds in his rise to power.

The final chapter offers a brief recap comparing the different corpuses of literature. Here it is noteworthy that weeping is the hallmark of Mesopotamian and biblical texts, and the expected presence of weeping is missing in the Greek texts. The biblical and Greek texts both address abandonment, while the Mesopotamian texts stand alone in their desire to comfort the child through song. One minor point concerning definitions: the terms weeping and crying are used throughout, as are the terms baby and infant, without being defined. Is there a difference in the literature between weeping/crying and baby/infant, or
are they interchangeable? For example, from the perspective of a contemporary Western reader, weeping seems be an adult reaction to severe emotional distress, while crying seems more generic. Ultimately these things are minor issues and offer areas to be further explored. Bosworth’s work contributes much to the field by rethinking the way scholars approach texts, providing a concordance of baby incantations, and pushing for a cross-cultural comparative approach. In highlighting crying infants, Bosworth provides them with agency. The work as a whole is a welcome addition to the field of children in the ancient world.