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The Importance of the I-You Relationship for Faith and Life

Beth Laneel Tanner

A few months ago, I went to an art immersion experience. I thought it was gimmicky and I had already seen many of van Gogh's famous works. I expected no surprises. The exhibit was fine, and then I walked into the third room. I stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by paintings. I realized I was no longer *looking* at art but was *surrounded* by it. I was standing in the piece and seeing it from a different perspective. Like my van Gogh immersion experience, I suggest we approach the psalms not as objects to be studied but from the perspective of being inside and surrounded by them and their powerful words and images. This perspective changes how we engage the psalms as they become not an object but our own words and images for our faith walk.

Beginning with the obvious, the psalms are poetry. Poetry requires us to engage differently. Incoming seminary students tell me that it is a difficult task. Hebrew poetry seems strange and difficult to them. They struggle because we live in a prose world surrounded by slogans, sound bites, and platitudes. They must learn to slow down and engage the metaphors, images, ironies, and reversals. The poetic genre of the psalms is a speed bump in our crazy, do-three-things-at-once lives. It invites us to sit and wonder about God and the world. Walter Brueggemann

To pray the psalms means entering them with one's whole self and to personally grab the words as one's own. The psalms portray an intimate relation between the self and God—an I-You relationship. In their totality, they express all the possible facets of such a relationship. Some psalms describe the world as it is, others as it could be through the power of God.

explains what biblical poetry is to him: "By poetry, I do not mean rhyme, rhythm, or meter, but language that moves like Bob Gibson's fastball, that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion, and grace."[1] Poets love language, and the ancient writers of the psalms are no exception.

So I suggest you pull up a chair and enter the psalm, paying attention to all those poetic devices you learned in seminary. Devices such as parallelism, metaphors, reversals, and chiasms are the poet's tools.[2] With these, the psalm-writers create what William Bellinger calls "the grammar of faith, a resource for faith in both the crises and joys of life and all the times in between."[3] Through these poetic structures, psalms go somewhere; they take us on a ride, sometimes ending where we began and sometimes bringing us from one feeling to another and another. So we must stay for the whole ride, ignoring how the lectionary chops them to pieces. A psalm is a whole poetic piece and should be treated as such. If we enter Psalm 22, we must stay with it through its thirty-one verses,[4] through all its lament and praise, so we come to its theological message that, according to Samuel Terrien, "begins with the terror of the void, but it ends with the fervor of the saved."[5] And if we dare to engage Psalm 119, we must again stay for the 176 verses and its eightfold acrostic pattern. This Torah psalm, with its seemingly endless repetition, "focuses the . . . heart and mind and directs him or her toward profound meditation."[6] Psalm 119 can cause the world to fall away, as the poetry tunes one's heart and mind to see God's purpose for humans. It offers a new perspective on our lives and calling if we take the time required to enter its sacred repetition and view of the world. We can only know the psalm fully when we engage it in its totality.

Entering the psalm requires us to pay attention to its grammar. Many psalms are first-person, a grammar different from the rest of the Bible. The Bible, for the most part, tells us about God and the world in narrative or sermonic form. We are the audience for the stories and speeches. The psalms are different. Their grammar invites, or even requires, us to participate. Yet strangely, many of us were taught to change the genre of the psalms and ignore their unique grammar by placing them in the mouth of David or the psalmist. We add the phrase, "As King David prayed," thus making the psalm a prayer we overhear. We are observers of another's prayer instead of praying it ourselves. This act violates the psalms'

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 3.

[2] A good review of the psalmic poetic devices can be found in Rolf Jacobson and Karl Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

[3] W. H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms as the Grammar of Faith: Prayers and Praise* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 4–5.

[4] The Revised Common Lectionary uses the full psalm on Good Friday, but when used otherwise, it is divided into verses 1–15 and 23–31 and 25–31 in Year B and verses 19–28 in Year C. "The Revised Common Lectionary," A Service of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu.

[5] Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 236.

[6] Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 296.

unique genre and reproduces that well-known pattern in other biblical literature of us as the audience.

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To be in the psalms means to resist that age-old habit. It means embracing these words of Scripture as our prayers and songs. To read the psalms without an authoritative mediator is liberating. It does not matter who we are, our age, college degree, or job status. When praying the "I" psalms, the world and its measures of success or failure disappear. There are only "I" and "You." As Walter Brueggemann notes, "The psalms are *prayers addressed to a known named identifiable You*. . . . Prayer is direct address to, and conversation and communion with, an agent known from a shared, treasured past."[7] The psalms place us in a direct relationship with God—You. No intervention from another is needed. Through the psalms, we can stand before God as fully human, even if we feel broken or sinful. Here justice and equality are part of the grammatical structure. To quote Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male nor female." Using the first person for many psalms erases all the divisions in the ancient world and ours. This overlooked aspect is their built-in grammar equality. This is even more amazing when you contemplate that the psalms were written in a world divided into regimented status categories—male and female, enslaved persons and free persons, the very rich and everyone else, the colonizers and the colonized. When we lose the authoritative mediator of David or the psalmist, the grammar places us as the ones standing with the divine "You."

Now psalms become *my* words and confession. Each person can picture their own life as they hear the words of Psalm 139:

> O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
> You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
> you discern my thoughts from far away.
> You search out my path and my lying down,
> and are acquainted with all my ways.

William Bellinger and Walter Brueggemann note, "God knows the entire life of the speaker, sitting down, rising up, thinking, lying down, walking and speaking. God examines and knows the speaker completely."[8] The words are intimate. How many are acquainted with all our ways? All our faces? All our secrets? All our

[7] Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 34.

[8] Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 582.

doubts and fears? All our habits and quirks? We all stand before God, stripped of all pretense and posturing. We are seen, and we are known. The thought is both daunting and amazing. We are humbled by our faults, failings, and vices and are empowered because God sees all of us and loves us as we are. Do our sermons, prayers, and worship help people see and feel seen by God? Do we see and feel God this way in our daily tasks? The grammar of the psalm reminds us that we are all known and treasured by God and that every one of us shares an intimate relationship with the One who made us.

In addition, everyone you like or dislike, love or hate, is just as treasured as you are! The psalms set us and the world in the correct balance. The psalms remind us that we are not in competition for God's affection and salvation. We are given autonomy and responsibility. The I-You relationship levels our world and, hopefully, how we think about and treat others. It might seem naïve to say that praying the psalms can reshape how we see ourselves and others. But the psalms remind us that we need to align our thoughts and deeds with those of God. The self is essential, but no more or less important than all the other humans God made. When we pray the psalms as our prayers, we learn a different worldview from the one we often encounter daily.

If we begin our understanding from the perspective of the I-You relationship, the commandments, statutes, and ordinances come not from a distant colonizing, controlling God but from a God in an intimate relationship with God's own.

The psalms also teach us about God, and what we learn should impact how we read the Bible. The I-You relationship that we learn in the psalms is a way to understand the narratives and instructions of the rest of the Bible. If we begin our understanding from the perspective of the I-You relationship, the commandments, statutes, and ordinances come not from a distant colonizing, controlling God but from a God in an intimate relationship with God's own. In the prophets, God's judgment/justice (*mishpot*) is not an uncaring divine fiat; God's justice is part of God's relationship with us—all of us. We can read the narratives of God's interaction with characters like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and David and see and feel the depth of the relationship and the trust expressed. The characters in the Bible are God's own, and so are we. The prophets' cries and Deuteronomy's exhortations to love God and do justice to the world are sent to us by a caring, involved Lord. As Deuteronomy often reminds us, we should "keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being (*tov*)" (Deut 10:13). Keeping the Torah is good for you and the community. God provides us with the gift of instructions to aid us in leading full lives. The psalms teach us about our relational God, which aids us in understanding our faith and the messages of the Bible.

The first-person grammar of the psalms also extends to the "us." The psalms call us to pray together with one voice, as in Psalms 46 and 100:

> God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble. (Ps 46:1)
>
> Know that the Lord is God.
> It is he that made us, and we are his;
> we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. (Psalm 100:3)

The early church father John Chrysostom (347–407) explained this to his congregation in a sermon:

> The psalm which occurred just now in the office blended all voices together and caused one single fully harmonious chant to rise; young and old, rich and poor, women and men, slaves and free, all sang one single fully harmonious melody. . . . All the inequalities of social life are here banished. Together we make up a single choir in perfect equality of rights and expression whereby earth imitates heaven. Such is the noble character of the church.[9]

In those moments, the church is a vision of equality and harmony. Our differences, grievances, and failings disappear, and we are one people. Yet I suspect that on any given Sunday, the congregation does not comprehend the miracle of "us." We take it for granted and let our differences define us. We come into service wearing the week—its news, our struggles, our brokenness, the world's brokenness. The psalms can bring us home to engage in the sacred "us"—but only if we realize the gift of "us." We noticed it during and right after the pandemic, but life is returning to what it was, and those feelings quickly become memories. We should follow the lead of Chrysostom and see the simple miracle that is the church praying together. If we practice our unity and acknowledge its sacredness, we may become better people and congregations. The psalms encourage us to do just that.

The psalms also sit uniquely as they teach their theology, confession, fear, and praise. The psalms both look back and prepare us for the future. The psalms represent in poetry the same concept as the Ghanaian image of the Sankofa bird, which looks back into the past while carrying its egg, representing the future.[10] The psalms activate our memories of God's work and presence in the past to help us prepare for and look forward to the future.

Psalm 30 is a perfect example of a psalm that looks back in order to move forward. It also contains elements of different genres—lament, praise, and trust—to

[9] John Chrysostom, *Homily 5*, quoted in J. Gelinaeu, SJ, "Music and Singing in the Liturgy," in *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, SJ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 442.

[10] Ayeeko, "Sankofa Symbol and Meaning," https://ayeeko.africa/blogs/blog/sankofa-sankofa-symbol-and-meaning. Note that some images of the bird have it with two heads: one for looking back and one for looking forward.

tell its tale. The first three verses are praise offered to God for help in the past, evoking memories:

> I will exalt you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,
>   and did not let my enemies rejoice over me.
> O Lord my God, I cried to you,
>   and you have healed me.
> O Lord, you raised my life from Sheol,
>   you restored me from those gone down to the Pit.[11]

As with all psalms, the situation is not explained. The words are a placeholder for the memories of the one praying of the times when God saved them from suffering and either from spiritual or even physical death. To stand in the psalm or in the place of the "I" means that our memories become the context of the prayer. As leaders, we can help the congregation become involved, either from the pulpit or in Bible study. We can invite folks to remember past difficult times and how God was present. The Scripture can bring memories for a person, family, or even church family. Instead of speaking of what the psalm meant to David or the ancients, the leader helps navigate the terms, poetic structures, and Hebrew words that provide the scaffolding and direction for their own direct engagement with the psalm. This takes the I-You grammar seriously.

The laments tell the story of pain and grief. Psalm 30 is pain remembered but remembered in terms of the "I" relationship with God. Micah McCreary explains why telling God about our pain is crucial: "The forming of a secure attachment bond creates a positive attachment to others and to the self. Attachment bonds are considered critical in reducing anxiety and handling loss."[12] Psalm 30 reflects the attachment of the "I" and God, and how that attachment sustained the individual amid the event and even redeemed it. The remembered event is transformed from one of trauma to one of God's presence and salvation. This attachment to God provides a way to deal with difficult situations and maintain mental health. Most of the laments work in the same way: we cry out to God in honest and unfiltered language, but we cry out to God because of our relationship with God, who has supported us in the past. The relationship remains, and the attachment helps us become resilient. This is known as "reframing trauma." Reframing provides a different way of looking at past trauma to celebrate survival.[13] The lament psalms are the ancient textbooks on nurturing our attachment with God and reframing trauma.

Other lament psalms use those past traumas and experiences to help us manage an uncertain future. Psalm 27 begins with:

> The Lord is my light and my salvation;
>   whom shall I fear?

[11] My translation.
[12] Micah McCreary, *Trauma and Race: A Path to Wellbeing* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2023), 23.
[13] McCreary, *Trauma and Race*, 119.

> The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
> of whom shall I be afraid?
> When evildoers assail me
> to devour my flesh—
> my adversaries and foes—
> they shall stumble and fall.
> Though an army encamp against me,
> my heart shall not fear;
> though war rises up against me,
> yet I will be confident. (vv. 1–3)

Like Psalm 30, Psalm 27 speaks of past or possibly current trauma. It also reflects a belief in God's presence, and that presence provides certainty so that fear is transformed into confidence. Lament psalms such as 27 can help us navigate an uncertain future. It seems strange to equate Psalm 27 with the activity of watching disaster movies, but in a way, they both help us create coping strategies, as Hamonic explains:

> Apocalyptic films provide emotional support to audiences by helping us understand the world around us, explaining the chaos unraveling around us, and providing structure and order to the idea of eternity. These films function as "equipment for living" because they offer anxious audiences possible strategies for surviving an apocalyptic event.[14]

These films also "attempt to work through historical traumas or to negotiate our way around human horrors."[15] Psalms do the same thing when they are our prayers. They provide "structure and order" in a chaotic world. Psalm 27 confesses that God is with us and has control of the future, so there is nothing to fear. At the same time, the threats expressed here are all too apparent. Many of us heard stories during the pandemic about the power of the psalms during those uncertain days. When prayed as our prayers, they helped people cope with the present uncertainty and trauma and reframed the future as one in God's hands. The psalms provided hope and supported mental health during the lockdown. They were part of therapeutic healing as they were in the ancient world. One recent example is Jeff Dafler's new book *Psobriety: A Journey of Recovery through the Psalms*.[16] He notes of Psalm 30, "Reading this psalm one month into sobriety gave me a great feeling of hope and reassurance."[17]

But we cannot stop with the lament and trust psalms; praise psalms are also needed to shape our worldview and promote mental health and wholeness.

[14] Wynn Gerald Harmonic, "Global Catastrophe in Motion Pictures as Meaning and Message: The Functions of Apocalyptic Cinema in American Film," *Journal of Religion and Film* 21, no. 1 (2017): 27–28.

[15] Harmonic, "Global Catastrophe in Motion Pictures," 6.

[16] Jeff Dafler, *Psobriety: A Journey of Recovery through the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021).

[17] Dafler, *Psobriety*, 36.

Laments fight the chaos and disruption, and most end with praise for God and God's presence and deliverance in the past. The ending verses are a response to God's actions. But praise is more than a response. Like the trajectory of the whole Psalter that moves from lament to praise, our prayers to God are incomplete without including the praise psalms. These define the world as it should be and as it was created to be. Rolf Jacobson explains their importance for our well-being:

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> While the *responsive* nature of praise is an acceptable starting point for understanding praise, praise cannot be adequately understood without grasping that praise is also *generative* in that praise creates a worldview, praise evokes a world that does not exist *in the same way* when praise is not spoken. Praise assumes a world where God is an active agent, and then praise evokes this world by *naming* God as the agent responsible for specific actions and blessings. There is no such thing as uninterpreted reality. By ascribing agency to God for specific transformations, praise interrupts reality in such a way that God is evoked as an active agent in daily life.[18]

Using the praise psalms as our prayers can alter how we see daily life. We are increasingly becoming a secular society. The church and God are seen as less and less relevant. Even modern praise music often affirms our world as it is instead of affirming visions of God's kingdom. The praise psalms, Jacobson argues, teach us to see God as active in our lives, not just in distress, but on an average Tuesday. The lament psalms see the world as it is; the praise psalms see the world as it should be. God is praised for God's power and control and justice and grace, and humans are set in their place not as masters but as grateful participants in God's world. Psalm 146 exemplifies this thought:

> Praise the Lord!
> Praise the Lord, O my soul!
> I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
>   I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
> Do not put your trust in princes,
>   in mortals, in whom there is no help.

[18] Rolf Jacobson, "The Costly Loss of Praise," *Theology Today* 57, no. 3 (2000): 377.

When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry. (vv. 1–7)

Earlier in the article, I stated that I was naïve enough to believe praying the psalms as my individual and our collective prayers can make us better Christians and better congregations. As I wrote that sentence, I knew it would seem foolish in a world of meanness, hate, and brokenness. But the ways we get better from all the brokenness are described in the Psalter. When we experience the psalms instead of observing them, they can speak a different reality into our lives and help us manage stress and trauma positively. The psalms offer us a world beyond the one we can see. ⴲ

BETH LANEEL TANNER *is the academic dean and Kansfield Professor of Old Testament at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. She coauthored* Psalms *in the NICOT series and has published multiple articles on biblical poetry. She focuses on making biblical poetry a resource for Christian faith.*