

Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms Through the Lens of Intertextuality*, New York etc.: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2001 (207 pages).

**Summary and Review** by Lia van Aalsum, Nijmegen, the Netherlands, November 2008, in: Spirin International (SPIRIN), the virtual research environment of the Titus Brandsma Institute, Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

In this book, the author (a Christian scholar of the Old Testament) uses some basic ideas of the literary theories on intertextuality for an intertextual hermeneutic of reading of the bible, especially the psalms. First I will give the main lines of her work, second I will comment on it. (The numbers between square brackets refer to the pages in the book.)

### Summary

Chapter one – *The concept of intertextuality* – and chapter two – *The psalms as an intertextual surface* – make up the theoretical part, while in the following four chapters the exegetical practice of an intertextual reading has been worked out. Intertextuality is a technical literary term, introduced by Julia Kristeva in 1967, pointing out that “a text is a mosaic or patchwork in which other texts are embedded either implicitly or explicitly” [6]. For this multifaceted and organic nature of texts the biblical scholar LaNeel Tanner prefers the term *bricolage* (Claude Lévi-Strauss). Not only does a text “contain in its own matrix a variety of other texts, written and cultural”, but also it “is engaged in a process of allusion in the mind of the reader, be that the reader from its original culture or a much later and culturally different reader” [9]. Bricolage is also an appropriate metaphor for the intertextual character of the bible text. The categories of quotation and of allusion are the most common tools for the identification of the bricolage. The different disciplines of biblical scholarship have a long and rich tradition in this kind of intertextual reading, and even have to add something to the literary research. Apart from the history of quotational studies in the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament and ancient Near Eastern documents, and the connection to source criticism and comparative work, the intertextual study of the Bible should take into account the following aspects: 1) the multiple versions of a text; 2) the various redactions; 3) the different literary standards of writing during the composition of the Hebrew and Christian bible texts; 4) the continuing influence of the Bible in Judeo-Christian cultures; 5) the sacred nature of the Bible in Judeo-Christian communities, as the Word of God, with moral and philosophical guidelines, meaningful for the life and salvation of persons in the present.

The definitions and theories of six well known literary scholars are discussed. *Julia Kristeva* breaks through the structuralist idea of a text with fixed signs and fixed meaning, and focuses on the text as a mosaic of quotations, absorbing and transforming other texts. Not only the letters on paper and their written sources make a text, but also history and society, the author's ‘text’ included, are texts. The intertextual writing then is reactionary and revolutionary, a “confrontation between the cultural sacred and the common profane” [19], a process “of creation by destroying and transforming the quotations and allusions in this mosaic to fit the writer's value system” [20]. Other scholars followed Kristeva, focusing on different aspects. The revolutionary character of intertextuality we see in the “author-centered and conflict oriented” approach of *Harold Bloom*, with his psychoanalytical battle between the father-writer and the writer-son (Freud's Oedipus complex), and the influence of unread poems. To *Roland Barthes*, intertextuality is also “a revolution against the traditional” [23]. He, however, puts the reader in the centre, being the place where the multiplicity of the text comes together and new arrangements of signification are discovered. *Michael Riffaterre* acknowledges the importance of the reader, but puts the most weight on the text, which he understands in a structuralist way, as a guide that leads the correct reading. This “wise reader” “is little more than a bloodhound following the intertextual scent embedded in the text that can lead to only one meaning” [24, 24-25]. Intertextuality “is not a reaction or criticism of a previous text or cultural norm, but is the standard way that literature is written and read” [24]. *Jonathan Culler* can be positioned between Bloom and Riffaterre. The intertextual potential lays in the text, and its presuppositions in the sentences and in the pragmatic clues (for example, a genre) will lead the reader into a certain attitude. Culler's interest is mainly

hermeneutic, more focused on the act of reading than on the material trace. *Gerard Genette* has tamed "the intertextual beast" [27] by means of his five categories of transtextuality (his overarching category instead of intertextuality): inter-, para-, meta-, archi- and hypertextuality.

The question that follows this presentation of intertextuality in literary scholarship is: how can Paris meet Jerusalem? "What are the philosophical parameters for an intertextual reading of biblical texts?" [28]. The presented literary theories result in three parameters. The first is about *the production of meaning*. The intertextual "reader-writer" is always looking for the intertextual interaction, while the intertextual "writer-reader" is using other texts to say more than is written. This hermeneutic tradition is typical for the development of the Bible. Michael Fishbane demonstrated how the Hebrew Scriptures are determined by the method of 'inner-biblical exegesis', and Daniël Boyarin showed the continuation of these intertextual interpretive strategies in the reading practice of Midrash. "The old is used again": "the canon and traditions of yesterday are adjusted and added to and given a new life by incorporation into new interpretations", "pieces of law, story, and poetry" are transformed "via another reader-writer's ideology and historical circumstance" [28 + 29]. This intertextual way of reading, writing and interpreting continued in the early Christian communities, in the theology of the Church and of the Reformation, in bible study (for example, Luther and Calvin), and in more recent scholarly research and theology. Clear is also that, as Regina Schwartz, Julia Kristeva and Susan Niditch did point out, "intertextuality is not an innocent or objective enterprise", "it is fraught with the ideology of the reader-writer or reader-editor" [31].

The second parameter is the determination of *the central character in the intertextual process*, within the framework of biblical studies. There is no clear answer to give. The author, the text and the reader: all three of them are determined by intentions, knowledge, experiences and contexts. The field of biblical interpretation is open to "readings that are as multiple as the readers of the text". The question then is: "how we give value and confirmation to a canon of interpretations within the circle of the academic and/or religious community" [35].

The third parameter is the *strategy of containment*. This notion of Tim Beal draws the attention to ideology, this is the quite natural phenomenon (not understood pejoratively) that a reader is shaped by different sorts of texts, as an individual and as a member of several communities as well. "These texts shared and unshared are the biblical text, the reconstructed history and culture of the biblical text, the reader's religious tradition, the reader's culture, the 'secular' literary community, the reader's interpretive community, and finally the life experiences of the reader" [35-36]. One can conclude that "there is no absolute objective standard even for the biblical text" [36], as is showed by the various major Bible translations (with, for example, the choices that have been made on the present and future tense) and in the long tradition of biblical studies. This tradition should not be considered "as the dragon to be slain", but "will simply be considered a series of texts" [36], taken very seriously, and sometimes forcing to 'revolutionary' decisions and new directions (for example, an intentional feminist reading).

In chapter two – *The psalms as an intertextual surface* – LaNeel Tanner explores the psalms on the different aspects of their intertextual complexity. Firstly, the psalms can be seen "as the stage for intertextual scenes" [50], because of the next four aspects. The psalm has the potential of a poem, with a mode of speech that is "indirect, open, and, rooted in the imagination" (51, Patrick Miller) and with an openness towards time, space and thinking patterns. Characteristic is "that they express the emotions and inner thoughts of human beings both in conversation with God and in thoughts about humanity" [51]. They are not historically specific, either time or culture bound (Miller). The psalms are subjective and therefore giving the reader a place to live (Peter Craigie). This openness leads to a variety of psalm studies, intertextual horizons and interpretations. To LaNeel Tanner it is an invitation "to explore the psalms as an intertextual interface that defines, to a large degree, Israel's theology and also offers opportunities for new and fresh readings in the present" [53]. Secondly, the psalms can be seen as bricolage, as the ultimate example of the biblical "mix of materials, used and reused by a culture to explain its interaction with God" [53]. This results in an eclectic book, constructed and

thematic in a way that leaves the modern reader with gaps of understanding, with “voices in a chorus, in conflict, and in competition” [56, Dana Nolan Fewell]. However, this construction has also a quality that comprehends “most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible” [56, Martin Luther]. Therefore an intertextual approach would not only be suitable, but also necessary to get a better understanding of the psalms. Following from this, thirdly, the psalms must be investigated on their relation with the Bible. An important appeal for an intertextual reading is done by the superscriptions of the psalms. Though the background and history are unclear, these superscriptions seem to open up intertextual horizons of understanding (Erich Zenger), especially related to the life of David (Sigmund Mowinckel), primarily reflecting a Midrashic tradition (Brevard Childs, Michael Fishbane, Elieser Slomovic). Another type of canonical intertextuality is found in the use of the psalms in the New Testament. However, once the connection is discerned, there is still a variety in questions and interpretations. The readers/writers have “different ideologies concerning how the texts interact and function together, which is the dominant text, and just how broad the net is thrown in making the connections” [63].

Fourthly and finally, LaNeel Tanner proposes a method for the intertextual psalms study, also in accordance with the suggestion of Tim Beal. The practice of intertextual reading asks for delimitation, or “strategies of containment”. Her first decision is to limit the intertextual connections to the Hebrew Bible. The intertextual enterprise then is “to discern allusions and the subsequent processing of those allusions” [71]. The four steps of Ziva Ben-Porat, who are directed at the simultaneous activations of two texts, are useful: 1) recognition of the marker, for instance a quotation, a word, a series of words, a name; 2) the identification of the evoked text; 3) “the interaction of the two texts to form an intertextual pattern” [73]; 4) “the activation of the evoked text as a whole in an attempt to form maximum intertextual patterns” [73, Ben-Porat]. Ben-Porat does not elaborate the crucial step, the recognition of the intertextual connection. According to LaNeel Tanner this recognition is “where the individuality and ideology of the reader comes to the forefront” [74].

All of the theory is put into practice in the four exegetical chapters that are following, in order to show the potential for intertextual research in the psalms. In chapter three Ps.90 is read, along with the Exodus/Sinai narratives (mainly Dt.32; 33), because of the superscription, “a prayer of Moses, man of God”, and the view of some scholars as well, that there is a connection with the wilderness wandering and Moses’ prayers and blessings. The results of this exercise suggest that this kind of intertextual reading was a practice in ancient Israel. Not only grants this a biblical mandate for intertextual reading, it also challenges present scholars to take this method seriously. In chapter four another form of intertextual research is practiced. Here the motifs of the well-known “Yahweh-*malak* psalms” (Ps.47; 93; 95-99) are investigated. Firstly, four major motifs of these seven psalms are explored as individual concepts: enthronement, creation, divine warrior, the historical or “human-time” perspective. Secondly, the bricolage or intertextual formation made by these motifs is explored on its (renewing) message. Thirdly is investigated how this message has been heard in different historical circumstances, especially in periods of supremacy, of captivity, and during the post-exilic times with apocalyptic tendencies. Theologically seen one can conclude that the bricolage of the motifs king-creator-divine warrior “articulated a theology that while stable and enduring was also flexible enough to adjust to a variety of conditions” [133]. Since the mythic and the historical aspects were never absolute though influencing each other, this theology was “adaptable enough to be grounded in very real historical conditions or to be eschatological, depending on the reader’s perspective, yet still retaining all of the images presented in the Yahweh-*malak* texts” [133]. Methodologically seen it is clear that “history matters” and that “the historical position of the readers makes all the difference in how these motifs were appropriated” [133]. This also means that the historical critical analyses remain important. The last two exegetical chapters work from out a feminist point of view. It is “an attempt to creative recovery” of the women voices in the psalms. In chapter five the righteous one of Ps.112 – usually visualized as a man – gets a female referent by the valiant and righteous woman of Prov. 31:10-31. After a brief discussion of the traditional interpretation of both texts, LaNeel Tanner presents her verse

by verse reading of the psalm, taking the Proverbs text as the referent. This comparison – initiated by her own intuition about ‘the one who fears the Lord’ and confirmed by scholarly insights concerning genre and form – seems to be fruitful, making clear that the valiant woman fears Yahweh in her actions. She reflects the more theoretical image of Ps.112, and there are remarkable connections with Ps.1 and Ps.111. This also is a challenge to the often masculine language and orientation of the psalms and of biblical scholarship, and to the sexual stereotypes all readers bring to the text from their culture as well. Chapter six contains an intertextual reading of Ps.88 with the narrative of the concubine in Judg.19, two texts full of brutality and sorrow, facing questions of evil and the absence of God. The intertextual reading is initiated by the Hebrew word פַּיָּם (my hand or palm) and not focused on literal similarities, but on the differences in the message, in order to see if they can teach us something. As in the former chapter the traditional interpretations of both texts are given, followed by the reading of both texts together. This reading is not done verse by verse, but in a more thematic way, sometimes referring to other commentaries. By using the horror of the treatment of women as a referent for this very dark lament psalm, the violence and sorrow in both texts are taken seriously. This “gives us access to those who are hurting in our world and stand also as a call for justice for them”. “In this way, the psalm and narrative go beyond voicing the violence of patriarchy, striving to be a place where their voices can be heard and acted on” [176].

In her *Conclusion* LaNeel Tanner formulates some methodological implications. In order to determine how intertextuality can be used for biblical scholarship, one should 1) take into account the various insights and methods of biblical and literary scholars on intertextual reading; 2) realize that the work of intertextuality has already been practiced by previous biblical scholars, though under other names; 3) acknowledge the complicated influence of history; 4) appreciate the more midrashic and homiletical aspects of the intertextual approach, as “an attempt to hear the psalms on another level, that of their resonance with the recorded story of Israel’s relationship with its God and in this exploration to return the psalms to the lives of women, both ancient and modern” [182]. Theological implications are: 1) accept from “God”, the Old Testament theology has not been able to articulate a central message or core and therefore it should maybe be more exploring the edges; 2) this intertextual project has explored some of the edges of traditional Christian scholarship, with the renewing of insights and methods, and broadening “the theological contemplation on the psalms” [183]; 3) research on the psalms that “is more concerned with poetic image than with formal structures and cultic practice”, inclined to hear the message of scripture, “in fresh and different ways” [183], using a methodology that reflects “the same *bricolage* that is the biblical text” [184].

## Review

One could wonder if it is worthwhile to write or read a review on a study of 2001. I think it is. There are not that much studies in intertextuality, especially biblical intertextuality. However, since the emergence of the term in the sixties of the twentieth century, literary scholars and biblical exegetes kept their interest. And with reason, as the study of Beth LaNeel Tanner proves. The first and second Testament as such are much more determined by intertextuality than in the last two centuries has been acknowledged. Nonetheless we, biblical scholars and scholars in biblical spirituality, are wrestling with the question how this complex and dynamic phenomenon can be handled in such a way, that it becomes a fundamental contribution to the theology of the academy, the Church and the personal life of its members. LaNeel Tanner gives some important clues. One of them is her focus on the strategy of containment, emphasizing the elements of choice and direction that are already present in intertextuality as ‘bricolage’. With Tim Beal she stresses that the writer/reader is formed and influenced by a variety of ideologies, knowledge, contexts, events, experiences, and intentions. Her question is how to manoeuvre meaningful, towards the past (canon and tradition) and the future. Another important clue is made up by the four steps of Ziva Ben-Porat. Though there are some critical remarks to make (see down), in principal they offer a clear and quite simple structure to study the intertextual relation and interaction between two texts. Especially the last two chapters of the practical

part of the book are a good example of this. A third clue comes from the totality of the intertextual reading practice. Those four exegetical chapters are a good example of the diversity and the possibilities of the intertextual research. One can take different entrances and take different routes, at one hand in a more theoretical way, to shed light on the different aspects of the intertextual Bible practice, on the other hand with respect to the content, to get more understanding of specific themes and ideas in the Bible.

However, these three important and meaningful clues also give cause to some critical remarks. I follow them in the reverse direction. The practical chapters do raise a question about the start of the intertextual connection: what is the reason to link two different texts and how do you legitimate this connection? Until now studies in biblical intertextuality paid not a lot of attention to this as a topic. However, I think it is important, in order to preserve the value of the phenomenon and the meaningfulness of the method of intertextual reading. Looking at chapter three, one can ask: is this really a case of intertextual reading, or are we dealing with a thematic reading; is it legitimate to attach that much weight to secondary literature, especially when they not seem to be intertextual studies themselves; if Ps.90, its superscription and crucial elements of Moses' life are related to each other, about what kind of intertextuality are we talking then: biblical or rabbinic. Chapter four seems to be more about motives than about intertextuality, and does raise similar questions, partly as the result of the amount of texts (seven psalms). The relative simple approach of chapter five goes more into the direction I would expect. Two texts (Ps.112 and Prov.31:10-31) are compared, verse by verse, with one of them as the point of departure. However, the process of reading also seems to focus more on thematic and metaphorical similarities than on textual matches. "The first intertextual impulse", LaNeel Tanner writes, "arose from the images in each". Though intuition is a very important dimension of all kinds of reception and interpretation, the academic field included, the textual similarities should be stronger to prove this intuition right. This also brings to the point of the academic rapport: maybe the similarities are more striking than this description shows. At first, chapter six seems to offer the same attractive simplicity and efficiency in the linking of Ps.88 and the concubine in Judg.19. Again the connection is based on a kind of intuition, the image of the hand or palm. LaNeel Tanner explicitly states now that she is not looking for a correspondence in texts or message, but for "their dissimilar chords" [169], because the texts and their stories are different. So what do we have at hand here? How intertextual is this reading? Isn't it more a thematic reading with a controversial aspect? As a human being, a woman and a scholar I support those readings that try to give voice to the suppressed ideas and presence of the female and vulnerable people. And the creativity of this attempt gives in to the Tanach as an intertextual work. However, it leaves me with the question how these interesting exercises could make a stronger contribution to the academic theory and practice of biblical intertextuality.

A few remarks on the four steps of Ziva Ben-Porat. As I said, at first sight they offer a nice structure for the intertextual reading practice. On further consideration, the intertextual reality is a bit more complicated. The exegetical chapters show that the texts as such and the specific scope of research as well ask for specific applications. Furthermore, the four steps raise questions related to the problems pointed out above. More clarity could be offered on the allusion as the coordinating category, on the recognition of the marker (is the quotation itself a marker, or is the quotation marked?) and for that on the identification of the intertextual companion. A crucial and unanswered question seems to be: on what ground do you relate two texts?

Finally, I will make a few observations in relation to the strategy of containment. To my opinion, it is an open door. Still, this door has to be opened again and again, not only in order to preserve ourselves from scholarly arrogance and to acknowledge the restrictedness of our abilities, but also to value our personal sensitivities and talents towards certain topics and texts. Maybe biblical scholars, especially those who are interested in intertextuality, should develop their sensibility towards the sacredness of Scripture a little bit more. In the religious and spiritual practice, at present and in the past, the Tanach is much more than an intertextual collection of religious history and topics. Even the psalms seem to

be much more than poetry. These matters concern the study and daily practice of spirituality. Now and then Beth LaNeel Tanner is referring to this issue. The question, how this really can be incorporated in a theory and practice of intertextuality, is not solved by her research. Nevertheless, it seems to me that she is moving into this direction. As such her work gives enough to ponder on, and therefore it can be seen as a valuable contribution to the academic study of biblical intertextuality and spirituality.