ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to understand the concept בְּרִית in Psalm 74:20. Several possibilities regarding its significance and content were discussed by various biblical scholars. The vague reference to בְּרִית makes a convincing solution in this regard very difficult. A combination of allusions and motives in the Psalm which coincide with aspects of the Yahweh-David בְּרִית, strengthens the assumption that הבְּרִית (v 20) alludes to the loyalty and faithfulness of Yahweh which he promised in the בְּרִית with his servant David.

1 INTRODUCTION

At almost the turn of this century, research on the biblical concept בְּרִית in the Old Testament has been given renewed stimulus by the publication of the book Der Neue Bund im Alten (1993) - edited by Erich Zenger². Not only the defects of thought on בְּרִית during the last century of research are challenged, but the immense impression which this book creates, is that בְּרִית needs to be thoroughly and anew investigated in every Old Testament text and context. In addition to the four identified phases of the discussion on בְּרִית by E W Nicholson³, Zenger’s book clearly introduces a fifth phase of critical stocktaking and an own emphasis on בְּרִית-thinking.

With regard to בְּרִית in the Psalms, a few studies which address this theme directly, already emerged⁴. The most recent view in this regard was brought forward by Frank Lothar Hossfeld⁵. Although very broadly outlined and no attention being paid to Psalm 55 and 83, his contribution firmly leads to the conclusion that "die Psalmen insgesamt bieten ein differenziertes Bild unterschiedlicher Bundestheologien"⁶. This research result turns up to be also true for the concept’s semantic use within the wider range of Old Testament contexts. Several exegetes like James Barr, Klaus Koch, Walter Zimmerli and Norbert Lohfink underscore this finding⁷. Hossfeld therefore correctly and convincingly corrected the research result of S D Sperling⁸ in view of בְּרִית’s function and theology in the Psalter.
Sperling, who hardly pays any attention to בְּרִית in the Psalms, nevertheless concludes as follows: “In sum, late biblical texts show that in the exilic and post-exilic periods, unconditional covenant, by which Yahweh and Israel remained in permanent relation, had triumphed over the notion of conditional covenant that might be broken”9. The uniform image which this conclusion reflects on בְּרִית can hardly be true for its appearance and function in the Psalter. The exiting challenge is therefore set for exegetes to proof the multi-dimensional character and variegation of the term in the various psalms.

בְּרִית occurs 21 times in 13 psalms10. One of the basic fields of research on בְּרִית in the Old Testament could be confined to the matter of the nature and antiquity or (in other words) the origin and significance of this concept11. This article is only an attempt to furnish a suggestion on the understanding of בְּרִיתs meaning and function in Psalm 74:20.

2 TEXT EMENDATIONS

The choice for Psalm 74 was not merely made at random. The vague reference to בְּרִית in verse 2012 as well as the uncertain text reading regarding בְּרִית, makes this psalm a challenging option for exegesis. Buttenwieser13 described the text here as “obscure”, while Bos14 also referred to the “severe textual damage” of verse 20. Due to this problem, Petersen15 left this verse untranslated.

As a result of alleged text corruption, the uncertain meaning of בְּרִית, the irregularity of the metre as well as the illogical connection between the two bi-cola in verse 20, notice should be taken of attempts to emend the Massoretical text reading הבּית לְברִית (Literally: “Look at the בְּרִית”)16.

Colourful suggestions are being made and the important text renderings include the following:

1. לְברִית is understood by Duhm and Briggs as the plural form of לְבֵּרִית (“fat ones”: Eg Ps 73:4) in the scriptio defectiva - style17 (לָבְרִית = לְבֵּרִית).

* לְברִית reads: “Look at the fat ones/Blicke auf die Gemästeten”.

2. Gunkel, Rogerson & McKay and the New English Bible understand לְברִית as the plural form of לְברִית (“creature”: Ben Sira 16:16, Num 16:30)18, where לְברִית = לְברִית.

* לְברִית then reads: “Look upon thy creatures/Blicke die Geschöpfe an”.

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3. Dahood replaces בירה בגרות with בירה בָּרוּץ ("Palace", "citadel", "temple": Eg 1 Chron 29:1,19). He thus reads לָבוֹתך: "Look down upon thy temple".

4. In accordance to Psalms 34:11 and 35:17 Kissane emends לָבוֹתך to לָכוֹפָי ("heathens")20. His rendering then reads: "Look upon the heathens, for they are full of lying".

5. Because the bicolon in verse 20 shows no parallelism and the meaning of בָּרוּץ is obscure, Bos21 rather suggests לָבוֹתך (derived from בָּר - "hollow", "pit") in stead of לָבוֹתך. Her emendation reads: "Look at the hollows".

6. Two other suggestions are less drastic. Kittel22 adds the conjugated verb תָּבוּר to the preposition ל and the second person masculine suffix to בָּרוּץ. The clause לָבוֹתך תָּבוּר then reads: "Sieh an die da schlossen deinen Bund" ("Look at those who enter into your בָּרוּץ"). In the footsteps of the LXX and Peshitta, a few exegetes23 follow the reading לָבוֹתך ("Look at your בָּרוּץ") by taking the same suffix form as in verses 19 and 21 in consideration. This is in my opinion a forced text alteration. The suffix could in any way be implied without changing the Massoretic text. With or without adding the suffix, the text and concept in verse 20 remain uncertain.

Despite these ingenious suggestions by skillful exegetes, I join the ranks of the majority of those who interpret the unchanged Massoretic text reading לָבוֹתך. To emend לָבוֹתך because of the metre or because the logical coherence with the rest of verse 20 is not clear, amounts to the harmonising of the text and its problems. It would rather be meaningful to try and determine the significance and function of the expression הבָּרִית לָבוֹתך within the context of the psalm as a whole. This expression occurs only here in the Old Testament and deserves therefore careful attention.

3 STRUCTURE25

The central theme of this artistic composed psalm exposes the destruction of the temple by the enemy and God's apparent absence and initial inaction among his people in the subsequent distress. These circumstances result in their lament and petition before God.
The most prominent literary characteristics of Psalm 74 are the repetition of certain *Leitworte* and the functioning of the poetic devices like the inclusio, chiasmus and contrasts or antithetic patterns. The text could be divided into five stanzas.

The variation of complaint and petition before God in stanza A (1-3) expresses the crisis of his people. Their election faith and Zion belief are shattered by the demolition of the sanctuary on mount Zion. This once purchased and redeemed people felt rejected, overcome by God's anger and unfaithfully treated.

Stanza B (4-8) portrays the dramatic and destructive conduct of the enemy. The destruction of the temple is metaphorically and colourful sketched. Diverse emphasis is accomplished by different descriptions of the temple with the expressions שלום שכוק מقدس, מועד.

Stanza C (9-11) could be described as an *axis* and fulfills a joint function in the psalm. The disappointment and frustration of God's people culminate in an interrogation of God. This questioning stresses their complaint and centres the affliction and distress in the structure of the psalm. Their revilement is here equalised with the scorn and the profanation of God's name and honour (7,10,18).

In contrast to stanza B, the fourth stanza, stanza D (12-17) depicts the creative and salvation activities of God. With the reign-motive of the Zion tradition (12) the kingship of God is brought forward. Not only is the hope for his people created in this stanza, but God's victory over all powers of destruction is anticipated by mythological allusions and vague motives from the Exodus and Creation traditions.

Stanza E (18-23) is a prayer for deliverance. Both the Name of God (18,21) and the life of his Beloved (19) - described as a dove (וְהָרָע... 19), the afflicted (עָנִי... 19), the oppressed (רָע... 21), the poor and needy (עָנִי אָבִי... 21) - is at stake. In this imperative loaded stanza Yahweh is requested to think of (18,22) and not to forget (19,23) ("to think of" and "not to forget") certain issues. Within this context and atmosphere the expression in verse 20 is uttered: "Look at the *ברית*, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence").

4 THE YAHWEH - DAVID *BRIT?*

The question is now: What is meant by *ברית*? What is the object of attention which God is summoned to focus on? Is *บรית* an indication of certain promises which God made or some obligations which He didn’t
meet? Is God’s people expressing a confession of sin$^{30}$ or are we dealing
with a cultic or concrete object like God’s people$^{31}$ themself?

On the initial question could be elaborated further. Did the first
audience or even the later readers of this psalm have God’s covenant with
the Fathers$^{32}$, with his redeemed people at Sinai$^{33}$, with his servant Dawid$^{34}$
or even with all three$^{35}$ in mind? To be or not to be, that is the question!

The vague reference to berit makes a choice in this regard very
difficult. Any choice is therefore quite uncertain. More than one possibility
could be taken in consideration. The exegete is thus challenged to make his
daring suggestion with great courage.

Despite the fact that the re-interpretation of the Davidic tradition
in exilic or post exilic Old Testament texts may be questionable, it doesn’t
exclude the possibility that Psalm 74 could in one or another way be
understood against the background of (an aspect or aspects of) God’s berit
with his elected servant David (2 Sam 7).

A combination of allusions and motives in the psalm which
coincide with aspects of the Yahweh-David berit, strengthens the
assumption that berit (20) in combination with the anticipated power
of God as Creator, Saviour (12-17) and Judge (22), allude to the loyalty
and faithfulness of Yahweh which he promised in the berit with David.
The original audience of this psalm therefore could have interpreted verse
20 in view of the Yahweh-David berit.

The visibility of the traditional salvation historical traditions in
Psalm 74 is vague and allusive. The Zion tradition seems to be the
exception. The notion of Zion in verse 2 serves a double function:

- Related to verses 3b-11, Zion illuminates the temple destruction
  and affliction of God’s people.

- In relation to the election- (2) and the reign-motives (12ff), Zion
  symbolises the security and firmness of God’s kingship and
  anticipates his faithfulness towards and loyalty to his people$^{36}$.

God’s election of Zion reflects a close relationship with his election of
David. Motives and allusions of these two biblical traditions are closely
related. It was to David whom God promised to extend his kingship and
reign from Zion$^{37}$. After having a bird’s view on the content of God’s berit
with David according to texts like 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, 2
Chronicles 6 and Psalm 89, the essence of this berit culminates in:
- God’s safeguard of David against his enemies;  
- the establishment of God’s throne, his temple and kingship through David; and  
- the expression of God’s loyalty and faithfulness towards David in his berit.

The substance of this David-berit could thus be reduced to God’s gracious promise to preserve the throne of David.

The initial picture of Psalm 74 starts with disappointment. The description displays a violation of the berit-promise(s) to David.

- In verses 4-8 the destruction of the sanctuary is spelled out;  
- the temple as abode of God’s Name had been profaned by the enemy according to verse 7; and  
- the promise of Yahweh’s faithfulness seems to be shattered. He rejects his people (1-2), for they do not experience the loyalty of his election love. God doesn’t seem to be at throne as he had promised to David. His berit partner is delivered in the hands of the enemy.

Therefore, in the disappointment of their new exilic or post-exilic situation, the supplicants of this psalm made a renewed appeal upon God’s loyalty by means of the expression חנ止め לברית.

Regarding the vocabulary and content, several similarities between the description of the temple destruction in Psalm 74 and the similar description applied to the David berit in Psalm 89:39-46, could confirm that berit (20) is an allusive reference to God’s loyalty as reflected in the Yahweh - David berit.

By uttering the words חנ止め לברית, God is requested to reinstall his faithfulness as he had promised to David, for, the situation of his People is dark and distressful.

5 THE FUNCTION OF BERIT

Being part of the prayers and requests in stanza E (18-23), berit fulfils an important function. Through the utterence of חנ止め לברית

- God’s people express their trust in an already existing relationship with Yahweh;  
- berit furthermore becomes the witness and motivation of God’s salvation activities.
Because *berit* implies God’s salvation, love and protection, it fulfils a comforting function. His people is comforted by the thought that God could do what he had promised (to David).

6 CONCLUSION

I therefore want to allege that the original audience of this psalm associated *berit* with God’s loyalty and promise to David. They want to see the content of this *berit* to be reinstalled in a hopeless situation of distress.

Allusions or references to God’s *berit* with the Fathers or with his people at Sinai can in my opinion not be verified convincingly from the text of Psalm 74. Other possibilities where *berit* could refer to God’s people as an object or where *berit* as an intentionally vague formulated term, functions as symbol of security for the supplicants, are less convincing.

The contents of *berit* in Psalm 74 remains uncertain and deserves therefore further research and reflection.

NOTES:

1 Paper read at the SBL-Congress in Münster, Germany 1993.


6 Hossfeld, *a w*, 174, 176.

Vol I, Cape Town 1982, 90 - "there is no doubt that b'rit was understood in varying ways in the religious history of Israel"; W Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in outline*, Edinburgh 1983, 53: "The talk of a covenant between Yahweh and Israel can take on various emphases"; N Lohfink, "Der Begriff Bund in der biblischen Theologie", *Theologie und Philosophie* 66/2 (1991), 166: "In den verschiedenen theologischen Entwürfen des Alten Testaments wird b'rit sehr unterschiedlich eingesetzt".


9 Sperling, *a w*, 72.

10 Psalms 25:10,14; 44:18; 50:5,16; 55:21; 74:20; 78:10, 37; 83:6; 89:4,29,35,40; 103:18; 105:8,10; 106:45; 111:5, 9; 132:12.

11 Nicholson, *a w*, 58, 60.

12 Hossfeld, *a w*, 174, is of the opinion that "die Aussage über den Bund knapp ist und die absolute Formulierung den Bundesbegriff nur determiniert: Schau auf den Bund, denn angefüllt sind die Schlupfwinkel des Landes mit Gewalt".


14 Bos, *a w*, 244.


21 Bos, *a w*, 224.

22 R Kittel, *Die Psalmen übersetzt und erklärt*, Leipzig, 51929, 250.


28 Anderson, *a w*, 546.

29 König, *a w*, 351.

30 Anderson, *a w*, 546.

31 Both Van der Ploeg, *a w*, 452 and Bos, *a w*, 243, chose for this option due to the use of the verb וָדַּרְת (which normally indicates a concrete object). The imperative וָדַּרְת (Pi’el) is a well known expression of prayer to suggest the absence or rather the allusive presence of God - (God being far away). See Psalms 33:13; 80:15; 102:20; 104:32; Isaiah 63:15. According to Amos 5:22, God looks down from heaven to a concrete object, while it becomes clear from Psalm 104:32 and Isaiah 5:30 that the preposition ה after וָדַּרְת also supposes a concrete object. Hossfeld, *a w*, 174, interprets וָדַּרְת as indication of the persecuted people “an das sich Jahwe gebunden hat”. Together with Spieckermann, *a w*, 125, he is of the opinion that verses 18-21 was a later addition to this psalm during the Seleucide period. According to the Qumran-writings he therefore motivates the argument that וָדַּרְת could refer to a group of people (1QS 5:11,18; CD 19:35) or to God’s people themself (1QM 14:4; 17:7). The argument, namely that God is summoned to glance at his people is an sich acceptable and even convincing in Psalm 74:20, but to motivate this viewpoint with the mentioned Qumran citations is not quite convincing. Not from one of the five cited texts is it sure that וָדַּרְת refers to a group of people. In CD 19:35 וָדַּרְת does not even appear (but מַדָּרֶת).

32 Due to verses 1 and 2, Ridderbos, *a w*, 263 has the opinion that וָדַּרְת could either indicate the covenant with the Fathers or the events with his people at Sinai.


36 Psalms 46:2, 8,12; 48:4; 125.

37 * Where both are elected, see 2 Chronicles 6:6ff; Psalm 132:13, 17.
* Where David is elected, see 2 Samuel 6:21; 7:12, 16; Psalm 89:20.
* Where Zion is elected, see Psalms 99:1-2; 146:10.


39 2 Samuel 7:13,16; 2 Chronicles 6:10; Psalm 89:37.

40 2 Samuel 7:15; 2 Chronicles 6:14-16; Psalm 89:25, 28-29.

41 For example God's rejection (Pss 89:39; 74:1); the profanation of the sanctuary/throne (Pss 89:40,45; 74:7); the description of the distressful situation (Pss 89:42; 74:10,18,17) and the enemy (Pss 89:43=74:10,18). See also the comparison in terminology between Psalms 89:43 and 74:3.