

ABSTRACT

*B*erit in Psalm 74

*This article is an attempt to understand the concept *b*erit in Psalm 74:20. Several possibilities regarding its significance and content were discussed by various biblical scholars. The vague reference to *b*erit 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 *b*erit, strengthens the assumption that הבט לברית (v 20) alludes to the loyalty and faithfulness of Yahweh which he promised in the *b*erit with his servant David.*

1 INTRODUCTION

At almost the turn of this century, research on the biblical concept *b*erit 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 deficits of thought on *b*erit during the last century of research are challenged, but the immense impression which this book creates, is that *b*erit 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 *b*erit by E W Nicholson³, Zenger's book clearly introduces a fifth phase of critical stocktaking and an own emphasis on *b*erit-thinking.

With regard to *b*erit in the Psalms, a few studies which adress 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 *b*erit's function and theology in the Psalter.

Sperling, who hardly pays any attention to *b̄rit* 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 *b̄rit* can hardly be true for its appearance and function in the Psalter. The exiting challenge is therefore set for exegetes to prove the multi-dimensional character and variegation of the term in the various psalms.

B̄rit occurs 21 times in 13 psalms¹⁰. One of the basic fields of research on *b̄rit* 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 *b̄rit*'s 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 *b̄rit* in verse 20¹² as well as the uncertain text reading regarding *b̄rit*, 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 *b̄rit*, 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 *הַבֵּט לְבָרִית* (Literally: “Look at the *b̄rit*”)¹⁶.

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

1. *בְּרִית* is understood by Duhm and Briggs as the plural form of *בְּרִיא* (“fat ones”: Eg Ps 73:4) in the *scriptio defectiva* - style¹⁷ (*לְבָרִיּוֹת* = *לְבָרִיאוֹת*).
* *לְבָרִית* reads: “Look at the *fat ones*/Blicke auf die *Gemästeten*”.
2. Gunkel, Rogerson & McKay and the New English Bible understand *בְּרִית* as the plural form of *בְּרִיאָה* (“creature”: Ben Sira 16:16, Num 16:30)¹⁸, where *לְבָרִיּוֹת* = *לְבָרִיאוֹת*.
* *לְבָרִית* then reads: “Look upon thy *creatures*/Blicke die *Geschöpfe* an”.

3. Dahood replaces ברית with בירה (“Palace”, “citadel”, “temple”: Eg 1 Chron 29:1,19)¹⁹. He thus reads לבירתך: “Look down upon *thy temple*”.
4. In accordance to Psalms 34:11 and 35:17 Kissane emends לברית לכפירים (“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 *b'rit* is obscure, Bos²¹ rather suggests לברות (derived from בור - “hollow”, “pit”) in stead of לברית. Her emendation reads: “Look at the *hollows*”.
6. Two other suggestions are less drastic. Kittel²² adds the conjugated verb כרת to the preposition ל and the second person masculine suffix to *b'rit*. The clause לכרתי בריתך then reads: “Sieh an die da schlossen deinen Bund” (“Look at those who *enter* into your *berit*”). In the footsteps of the LXX and *Peshitta*, a few exegetes²³ follow the reading לבריתך (“Look at *your b'rit*”) 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 להבט לברית²⁴. To emend לברית 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 להבט לברית 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 shattered²⁶ by the demolition of the sanctuary on mount Zion. This once purchased and redeemed people felt rejected, overcome by Gods 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 מועד, מקדש, and משכן שמה.

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 deliverance²⁷. Both the Name of God (18,21) and the life of his Beloved (19) - described as a dove (תור... 19), the afflicted (עני... 19), the oppressed (דך... 21), the poor and needy (עני ואביון... 21) - is at stake. In this imperative loaded stanza Yahweh is requested to זכר (18,22) and to אל-תשכח (19,23) ("to think of" and "not to forget") certain issues. Within this context and atmosphere the expression in verse 20 is uttered: הבט לברית כי מלאו מחשכי־ארץ נאות חמס ("Look at the *berit*, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence").

4 THE YAHWEH - DAVID *B^{erit}*?

The question is now: What is meant by הבט לברית? What is the object of attention which God is summoned to focus on? Is *berit* an indication of certain promises²⁸ which God made or some obligations²⁹ which He didn't

meet? Is God's people expressing a confession of sin³⁰ or are we dealing with a cultic or concrete object like God's people³¹ themselves?

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 Fathers³², with his redeemed people at Sinai³³, with his servant Dawid³⁴ or even with all three³⁵ in mind? To be or not to be, that is the question!

The vague reference to *b'erit* 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 *b'erit* 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 *b'erit*, strengthens the assumption that **הבט לברית** (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 *b'erit* with David. The original audience of this psalm therefore could have interpreted verse 20 in view of the Yahweh-David *b'erit*.

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 people³⁶.

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 Zion³⁷. After having a bird's view on the content of God's *b'erit* with David according to texts like 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, 2 Chronicles 6 and Psalm 89, the essence of this *b'erit* culminates in:

- God's safeguard of David against his enemies³⁸;
- the establishment of God's throne, his temple and kingship through David³⁹; and
- the expression of God's loyalty and faithfulness towards David in his *berit*⁴⁰.

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 *הבט לברית*.

Regarding the vocabulary and content⁴¹, 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 *הבט 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 *B̄RIT*

Being part of the prayers and requests in stanza E (18-23), *berit* fulfils an important function. Through the utterance of *הבט 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 *b'rit* 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 *b'rit* with God's loyalty and promise to David. They want to see the content of this *b'rit* to be reinstalled in a hopeless situation of distress.

Allusions or references to God's *b'rit* 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 *b'rit* could refer to God's people as an object or where *b'rit* as an intentionally vague formulated term, functions as symbol of security for the supplicants, are less convincing.

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

NOTES:

- 1 Paper read at the SBL-Congress in Münster, Germany 1993.
- 2 E Zenger (Hrsg), *Der Neue Bund im Alten. Zur Bundestheologie der beiden Testamenten*, Freiburg 1993.
- 3 E W Nicholson, "Covenant in a century of study since Wellhausen", in: A S van der Woude (ed), *Crises and Perspectives* (Oudtestamentische Studies 24), Leiden 1986, 55ff.
- 4 J W H Bos, *Psalms and Sinai covenant*, Michigan 1977; H J Kraus, *Theologie der Psalmen* (BKAT XV/III), Neukirchen 1979, 65-71; S J de Beer, *The Davidic covenant in the Psalms: A methodological investigation*, Pretoria (unpublished), 1989. In the South African context single contributions came from F C Fensham, "Psalm 21 - A Covenant Song?", *ZAW* 77 (1965), 193-202 and P J Nel, Psalm 132 and covenant theology, in: W Claassen (ed), *Text and Context: Old Testament and Semitic studies for F C Fensham*, Cape Town 1988, 183-191.
- 5 F-L Hossfeld, "Bundestheologie im Psalter", in: E Zenger (Hrsg), *a w*, 169-176.
- 6 Hossfeld, *a w*, 174, 176.
- 7 J Barr, *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie - Festschrift W Zimmerli*, 1977, 34 - "*b'rit* covers a wide semantic territory"; K Koch, *The prophets*,

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".

- 8 S D Sperling, "Rethinking Covenant in Late Biblical Books", *Biblica* 70 (1989), 50-73.
- 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".
- 13 M Buttenwieser, *The Psalms*, Chicago 1938, 608, 615.
- 14 Bos, *a w*, 244.
- 15 C Petersen, *Mythos im Alten Testament*, Berlin 1982, 127.
- 16 C T Begg, "The covenantal dove in Psalm lxxiv 19-20", *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1987), 78 summarises a few suggestions.
- 17 B Duhm, *Die Psalmen*, Tübingen 1899, 196 and C A & E G Briggs, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the book of Psalms*, Vol 2, 1907, 151, 160.
- 18 H Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, Göttingen ⁵1968, 326; J W Rogerson & J W McKay, *Psalms 51-100*, Cambridge 1977, 127.
- 19 M Dahood, *Psalms II*, New York 1968, 208.
- 20 E J Kissane, *The book of Psalms*, Dublin 1966, 332.
- 21 Bos, *a w*, 224.
- 22 R Kittel, *Die Psalmen übersetzt und erklärt*, Leipzig, ⁶1929, 250.

- 23 H Schmidt, *Die Psalmen*, Tübingen 1934, 141; A A Anderson, *The book of Psalms*, London 1972, 546, as well as the *Revised Standard Version*.
- 24 E König, *die Psalmen*, Gütersloh 1927, 351; J Ridderbos, *De Psalmen*, Kampen 1958, 248; A Weiser, *The Psalms*, London 1962, 517; J P M van der Ploeg, *Psalmen, Deel I*, Roermond 1973, 452; N A van Uchelen, *Psalmen Deel II*, Nijkerk 1977, 251; H Spieckermann, *Heilsgegenwart - eine Theologie der Psalmen*, Göttingen 1989, 125.
- 25 D J Human, "Die structuur en traditiesamestelling van Psalm 74", *Skrif en Kerk* 14/2 (1993), 205-210.
- 26 L Vosberg, *Studien zum Reden vom Schöpfer in den Psalmen. Beiträge zur Evangelischen Theologie*, München 1975, 43ff and J Jeremias, *Das Königtum Gottes in den Psalmen*, Göttingen 1987, 29.
- 27 P van der Lugt, *Strofische Structuren in de Bybels-Hebreeuwse Poezie*, Kampen 1980, 315.
- 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 **פָּעַל** which normally indicates a concrete object. The imperative **פִּעַל** (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 **ל** after **פָּעַל** also supposes a concrete object. Hossfeld, *a w*, 174, interprets *b^crit* 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 *b^crit* could refer to a group of people (1QS 5:11,18; CD 19:35) or to God's people themselves (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 *b^crit* refers to a group of people. In CD 19:35 *b^crit* does not even appear (but **רָוַח**).
- 32 Due to verses 1 and 2, Ridderbos, *a w*, 263 has the opinion that *b^crit* could either indicate the covenant with the Fathers or the events with his people at Sinai.

- 33 Briggs & Briggs, *a w*, 156 and P Schelling, *De Asafpsalmen*, Kampen 1985, 99.
- 34 S Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's worship*, Vol I, New York 1962, 198, just ask the question regarding this suggestion.
- 35 A F Kirkpatrick, *The book of Psalms*, Cambridge 1921, 447.
- 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.
- 38 2 Samuel 7:11; Psalm 89:23-24.
- 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.