Pieter de Vries
Free University of Amsterdam

In this study, twenty-two essays explore how the notion of the covenant functioned during the Neo-Babylonian, Persian, and early Hellenistic periods. While special attention is paid to the Sinaitic covenant, the place of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenant in this period is also investigated. The contributors to this volume come from many different countries, including Israel, Germany, South Africa, Great Britain, and the United States. The essays are divided into five sections, on the Pentateuch, the historical books (Deuteronomistic History), prophecy, the wisdom literature, and, finally, Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

The authors writing on the Pentateuch all assume a late date for the material under consideration. I argue for a final edition and update of the Pentateuch in the postexilic period, which does not preclude an earlier date of its substantial content. With regard to the theme of covenant, it is important to note that we have parallels with the biblical covenants not only in the Neo-Assyrian treaties but also in the Hittite ones. The fact that material regarding the biblical covenants is relevant for the Persian period is not an argument as such that this material originated in this period. The authors of the articles on the Pentateuch all presuppose a postexilic date for the material they handle.

Jacob Wörle focuses on the specific covenants associated with Noah and the patriarchs. Key texts in his analysis are Gen 17, 24, 28, and 36. He demonstrates that, although Esau is excluded from the promise of the land extended to Abraham, he is a beneficiary of the
promise made to Noah. I agree but suggest that attention ought have been given to the significance of the fact that ultimately all nations of the earth will be blessed in Abraham’s seed.

Andreas Schüle addresses the covenant in Exod 31:16, where one finds the expression "eternal covenant," which also occurs in Gen 7 and 17. Schüle argues that the Sabbath observance imposes here a stronger covenant requirement on Israel. I would say that this is more true with regard to Gen 7 than to Gen 17, for in the latter there is the requirement to practice circumcision. More strongly than Schüle does, I would stress that the fact that the eternal covenant could be broken on the part of Israel, yet God will ultimately remain faithful to his covenant.

Wolfgang Oswald shows that we find in Exod 34 indications that the Covenant Code is replaced by the Deuteronomistic law. Thomas Hieke’s essay shows that in Lev 26 the notion of the covenant guarantees that destruction and doom cannot have the final word. With regard to the date of the material of Lev 26, I would point to the linguistic arguments of Mark Rooker that its language is older than that of Ezekiel. If we follow these arguments, we must come to an earlier date for Lev 26 than Heike does.

The book’s second section, on the Deuteronomistic History, consists of three essays. I consider Reinhard Achenbach’s essay on the unwritten text of the covenant the most important of this section. He shows that Deut 18:15–18 opens the gate to messages of the covenant that are in line with the covenantal message of Moses. The second part of the law of the prophets is the foundation of prophetic torah, as we can find it in Jeremiah and other prophets. The unwritten text of the covenant mentioned in the law of the prophets took its final form in the prophetic writings.

Ehud Ben Zvi demonstrates how historical texts shaped social memory in the Late Persian period. He shows that, unlike promises associated with YHWH’s choice of Israel, Jerusalem, and divine instruction, the promise of David was much negotiated. The fact that it was so saliently negotiated shows that this promise was a central site of memory.

Cynthia Edenburg investigates Persian developments in the perception of covenant in the Deuteronomistic History. She assumes that not the Hittite but the Neo-Assyrian treaties inspired the framework for the Deuteronomistic laws. She argues that, with the transition to the Persian period, the changed circumstances called for reinterpreting the covenant idea. She thinks there are indications that both returnees from the Babylonian exile and people who remained in the land are addressed.
Part 3, on prophecy, consists of eight essays, two of which are devoted to Jeremiah. In “The Covenant in the Book of Jeremiah: Employment of Family and Political Metaphors,” Dalit Rom-Shiloni argues that the prophet uses the marriage metaphor to accuse the people of unfaithfulness and ingratitude. Drawing on the law of adultery, this accusation does not hold out hope for the future. The prophet uses the metaphor of the political covenant as an image that may be transformed to portray a future covenant relationship. For the prophet, the adoption metaphor was especially suited for a new future because it balances the familial and political metaphorical worlds. Rom-Shiloni rightly observes that the new covenant stressed the continuity of God’s relationship with Israel. I would add that the new covenant guaranteed the obedience that God required.

Although the word covenant is not used in Joel and Haggai, we find an essay on each of those prophets in the study. In “Presumptions of ‘Covenant’ in Joel,” James Nogalski convincingly shows that Joel presumes that the covenant curse is in effect. When the people repent, YHWH will remove the curse and bless them. The teaching on removal of the alienation between YHWH and the people becomes explicit in Joel 2:12–17, which is the turning point of the book.

As in Joel, we find in Haggai imprecatory material related to the concept of covenant, as is shown by John Kessler’s “Curse, Covenant, and Temple in the Book of Haggai.” Haggai does not accuse the people of having ruptured or severely damaged the covenant. His use of the futility curse formulation is applied to a significant fault that hinders the relationship between the community and YHWH, but the covenant is not seen as broken.

In “Zechariah 11 and the Shepherd’s Broken Covenant,” Richard J. Bautch reads Zech 11 in the wider context of chapters. 9–13. In Zech 11:10 we read of a broken covenant. Bautch, like most Old Testament scholars, situates the breaking of the covenant and the death of the three shepherds in the postexilic period. I would suggest, however, that the prophet refers to the preexilic situation, and would identify the three shepherds with the last three kings of Judah. As an alternative, I would mention the proposal of M. R. Stead, who identifies the three shepherds as a collective reference to the offices of king, priest, and prophets.

Part 4 of the volume opens with “The Psalms, Covenant, and the Persian Period,” by W. H. Bellinger Jr., in which he considers Pss 44, 74, 79, and 89. Bellinger argues that the covenant lamented in Pss 44, 74, and 79 is the Mosaic covenant. That is certainly the case, but I would add that the Abrahamic covenant is also in the background of the Mosaic covenant here. In Ps 89, the plea of the lamenting community is the covenant with David. Again, I would add that we must always see this covenant under the umbrella of the Abrahamic covenant. In “Poems, Prayers and Promises: The Psalms and Israel’s Three Covenants,” Carol J. Dempsey shows that, regardless of their dating, Pss 103, 105, 106, and 132 appeal collectively to the three most important of Israel’s covenants: the Abrahamic covenant, the Sinaitic covenant, and the Davidic covenant.

In “‘When the Friendship of God Was upon My Tent’: Covenant as Essential Background to Lament in the Wisdom Literature,” Jamie A. Grant shows rightly that the classic statement of Walther Zimmerli and others that the wisdom literature rejected the notion of covenant is unfounded. He argues that the basis of Job’s extended lament is grounded in the accusation of covenant rejection by YHWH and in the quest for renewed covenant relationship with God. In “Qohelet and the Covenant: Some Preliminary Observations,” Thomas M. Bolin offers compelling reasons why Qoheleth is not denying the orthodox teaching of the relationship between doing well and being blessed but rather is limiting its validity, given the very circumscribed arena posited for human action. I underline the statement of Bolin that emphasis on Qoheleth’s individuality does more to reveal our own religious and historical assumptions than it does to reveal the intention of the original author.

The final section of the volume is devoted to Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. In “Solemn Oath? Renewed Covenant? New Covenant?,” Douglas J.E. Nykolaishen investigates the effects of the unusual aspects of the so-called covenant renewal in Ezra 9–10. The narrator makes clear that the situation of the returned exiles represents a partial fulfillment of the prophetic expectation but that there is further progress yet to be made. Ezra 9–10 has the features of a covenant renewal in terms of being a genuine step forward.

Mark J. Boda contributes a very interesting essay titled “Reenvisioning the Relationship: Covenants in Chronicles.” Limiting himself to the texts that refer to the covenant with the classic vocabulary of ובת ברית, he argues that the emphasis shifts from a focus on covenant relationships in general to a focus on renewal of the cult to which the people commit themselves. Comparing Chronicles with Kings bring to light that in 1 Chr 5:25–26 the Chronicler’s allusion to 2 Kgs 18:11–12 shifts the focus from “transgressed the covenant” to “acted treacherously against the God of their fathers and played the harlot after the gods of the peoples of the lands.” It is true that in Chronicles we find the language of immediate relationship rather than of covenantal language. However, I notice
two further examples of בְּרֵית בָּרוּ 취 in 2 Chr 6:11 and 21:7. The first occurrence refers to the covenant of YHWH with Israel and the second with David. I would also point to the occurrence of בְּרֵית שָׁם בָּרוּ 취 in 1 Chr 16:5 and of בְּרֵית שָׁם בָּרוּ 취 in 2 Chr 6:14, of which YHWH is the subject. Further, I point to the expression בְּרֵית מַלָּח in 2 Chr 13:5. Again, we must say that YHWH is the subject here. I am aware that Boda wrote on the Davidic covenant elsewhere, but still I think it is an omission not to give a short explanation of these occurrences. The same must be said of the expression בְּרֵית בָּרוּ 취. Boda explains that he leaves the texts of בְּרֵית בָּרוּ 취 in the hand of Louis Jonker, who wrote the final essay in this volume. Even so, a few remarks by Boda here would be helpful on the relationship between what he rightly observes and the fact the Chronicles uses בְּרֵית בָּרוּ 취 for the relationship between YHWH and his people in the expression בְּרֵית בָּרוּ 취.

In the final essay, Jonker shows how the close association of בְּרֵית בָּרוּ 취 and אָרוּת seems pivotal in the Chronicler’s cultic understanding. The אָרוּת is associated both with the presence of YHWH and with the Davidic royal house. I would add to this conclusion by noting that having YHWH as its subject seems to focus on the priestly and the Davidic aspects of his covenant with Israel. In other contexts, the word בְּרֵית falls into the background, and more intimate relational terms are preferred. So we can combine the results of the investigations of Boda and Jonker.

Much can be learned from the essays in Covenant in the Persian Period. Nevertheless, I count it a considerable disadvantage that the bundle does not end with an essay seeking to give a synthesis of what has been offered, especially since the introduction merely gives an overview of the essays that follow. I would say that, behind the diversity of ideas related to covenant themes, there still is a striking unity: it is the sure conviction that YHWH never ultimately disrupts his relationship with Israel.