

Der Begriff Διαθηκη im Neuen Testament
Johannes Behm
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From more than one side the New Testament idea of διαθηκη has of late been made the subject of renewed investigation. In the volume of Theological Studies dedicated to Theodor Zahn in 1908 appeared a paper by Riggenbach on "Der Begriff διαθηκη im Hebräerbrief". Here not merely the usage of the Epistle to the Hebrews but also its antecedents in the Septuagint are enquired into. In the year following Norton published his dissertation entitled "A lexicographical and historical study of διαθηκη from the earliest times to the end of the classical period" (Chicago Historical and Linguistic Studies in Literature related to the New Testament II, 1). Norton's work, while not including the biblical literature, yet is indirectly of importance for the later development of the idea. Making use of these recent partial discussions Behm now, in the monograph before us, offers a comprehensive study of the subject in all its aspects. In his statement of the extra-biblical data he deals with both the classical literature and the material of the Koine, and in connection with the biblical problem both the Septuagint and the New Testament sides of the question are carefully enquired into, and even the Old Testament idea receives some share of attention. Besides these three contributions a work by Lohmeyer on the same subject has been announced and may have meanwhile appeared, although it has not yet come to our notice. There is reason to hope that in result of these various efforts some new light will be shed, on what, notwithstanding its long history in exegetical and theological debate, still constitutes one of the New Testament problems.

The old controversy was whether διαθηκη meant "covenant" or "testament". This amounted practically to the question whether in the Septuagint and in the New Testament writings the old revelation-idea of Berith was preserved, or whether a new, differently-oriented idea, that of "testament" was substituted for the covenant-idea. To be sure the alternative "covenant" or "testament" had already been modified by the view of many that in the Old Testament itself Berith, either entirely or in part, originally or through a secondary development, has the meaning of "ordinance", "disposition". On that view the alternative became "disposition" or "testament" and in consequence lost considerable of its sharpness, for a "disposition" stands nearer by far to a "testament", which is in reality only a specific kind of disposition, than does a "covenant". Now in regard to this alternative in its twofold form, there has been shown of late a perceptibly growing inclination among scholars to favor for the Septuagint and the New Testament writings the meaning "testament". The demand that the terms of the Greek biblical documents shall be interpreted in the light of the contemporary Greek language has naturally led to this, for both in classical Greek and in the Koine "testament" seemed the well-fixed and only meaning of διαθηκη. Cremer in his lexicon had already taken this stand. Deissmann advocates it. Riggenbach in the paper above named applies it at least to the Epistle to the Hebrews. Franz Dibelius adopts it for his interpretation of the words of institution of the Supper (*Das Abendmahl*, 1911).

Behm's treatise marks a certain check to this recent tendency in favor of "testament", for he energetically advocates that διαθηκη means prevailing in the Septuagint and everywhere (with the exception of Gal. 3:15-18 and Heb. 9:16-17) in the New Testament "disposition", "authoritative arrangement" in general, without reflection upon any specific testamentary character. This is interesting for the reason that it would seem to open up a way of recovering the harmony and

continuity between the Hebrew Old Testament usage and the Greek biblical usage (Sept. + New Test.), which seems in danger of being lost where the exclusive and specific meaning of “testament” is insisted upon. The transition from “covenant” to “testament” creates a biblico-theological problem, since the unity of revelation seems to be sacrificed, which in regard to so important an idea is a serious matter. If then this unity can not be preserved by maintaining that in the New Testament also διαθηκη = “covenant”, the next best thing would seem to be to emphasize that in the Hebrew Scripture already Berith is frequently “disposition” and that in the New Testament it has prevalingly this sense. This not only approximates the one to the other, as the development from “disposition” to “testamentary disposition” does, but it restores absolute identity between the two.

So far as the Septuagint and the New Testament usages are concerned Behm actually proceeds to do this. He shows that in both διαθηκη = “disposition” and neither “testament” (with exception of the two passages cited above) nor “covenant”. But, strange to say, he does not make use of the opportunity thus afforded for showing the fundamental agreement between the Old and New Testament. On the contrary, by insisting upon it that in the Hebrew Bible Berith has always the specific connotation of “covenant”, he bars this way of escape from the difficulty at the very moment it seems to open up. The result is that he simply adds to the two other forms of a discontinuous development (from “covenant” to “testament” and from “general disposition” to “testament”) a third form (from “covenant” to “general disposition”) and as compared with the second this third form even seems to make the break between the two usages greater. Of course we do not mean to urge this here by way of criticism or as in any sense prejudicial to the author’s conclusions. His enquiry is not conducted from the point of view of harmonizing the two canons, but simply to determine objectively what the New Testament facts are. He is quite aware that his conclusions involve a certain material modification of the idea in its transition from the Old to the New Testament. Διαθηκη and Berith he tells us (p. 31) are anything but equivalents. Their fundamental meanings lie wide apart, and in spite of all approximation they always have remained to some extent heterogeneous. “To the Hebrew mind Berith always retained the character of a legal contract based on the principle of mutualness, the Greek mind felt in διαθηκη always something of the idea of a free disposition by the will of one party.” Especially important and fraught with consequences was this dislocation of the idea in the religious sphere. The author defines its theological significance in the following words (speaking of the Septuagint): “Out of the ‘covenants’ of Jehovah with the patriarchs, with Moses and David, with the people of Israel, etc., with which the idea of legal obligation and of inviolableness is necessarily associated, now are made free arrangements, sovereign dispositions of the divine will, revealing God’s demands as well as his saving purposes. The contract with its synergism gives way to the monergism of the sovereign ordinance (‘selbstherrlicher Erlass’) by which God prescribes his will to man, commanding or by way of promising gifts, as law or grace” (p. 32). And the author looks upon this as a progress towards a higher standpoint: the Old Testament feature, that God follows the forms of human legal procedure is an inadequate feature. He quotes with approval the words of Deissmann: “if Berith means in any sense contract . . . then διαθηκη is not a verbal translation, but a substitute marking a progress in the direction of a universal religion: the Scripture which conceives of the relation between God and man as a divine διαθηκη occupying a higher standpoint, the standpoint of Paul and Augustine, than the Scripture which represents God as engaged in the making of contracts”. The Septuagint and the New Testament have transformed the conception, but they have deepened it and preserved all that is in it essential from a religious point of view. The transformed idea becomes a “witness borne by the consciousness of primitive Christianity to the

majesty of the God of the Bible in the unconditionalness and monergism with which He makes his saving disposition” (p. 107).

All this is very fine and it may even seem beautifully to fit into one specific line of the part played by the covenant-idea in Reformed Theology. If *διαθηκη* stands for the sovereignty and monergism of God in salvation, then it is an eminently Augustinian and Calvinistic idea. One thing we do not altogether like about this is, that it seems to be bought at the price of a certain depreciation of the Old Testament standpoint. That is characterized as involving a degree of synergism and of anthropomorphism derogatory to the divine majesty. Questionings arise whether there is not perhaps enshrined something else of a positive religious value in that very aspect of two-sidedness of the Old Testament Berith-conception than the anthropomorphism and synergism which the author so keenly feels as inadequacies, whether these seeming inadequacies do not on closer examination prove to be eminent merits by no means inconsistent with thought of a slightly different complexion from the monergism and sovereignty belonging to the idea from another point of view. The dupleism of the Old Testament Berith certainly stands to the religious consciousness of the Old Covenant itself for something of positive and abiding significance, which even the New Testament development of the idea could not have stripped off without serious loss. If we are not mistaken the two elements of supreme gracious condescension and of close intimacy of life are inherent in it, inherent we mean not in the general notion of the Berith but in the covenant aspect, the dupleic aspect of the Berith. And what looks like synergism hardly deserves this evil name, if it is remembered that the covenant rests in the Old Testament on the basis of the accomplished redemption. By emphasizing these points we do not mean to say that the majesty and the monergism are not also there in the conception. On the contrary, we would differ from the author in finding them in the Hebrew Scriptures no less than in the Greek. Notwithstanding all the emphasis placed upon the two-sidedness of the Berith, Scripture always so represents it that the Berith in its origin and in the determination of its content is not two-sided but based on the sovereignty of God. In our opinion the whole richness of the idea in a religious point of view can only be appreciated by making the sovereign and the condescending aspects of it illuminate and accentuate each other. That the sovereign majestic procedure issues in condescension and fellowship of life,—this is that religious treasure which the covenant-idea carries in itself. That the monergism and the majesty are consciously present to the Old Testament mind appears from the many passages where Berith assumes the meaning of “ordinance”, “disposition”. We regret that the author has not been faithful to the Erlangen-tradition, as represented by Von Hofmann, in emphasizing this, as at least a prominent strand of the Old Testament usage, and are at a loss to see how he could well avoid recognizing this, since the same arguments derived from the synonymies and constructions to which he appeals on pp. 20 ff. in proof of the frequency of this meaning in LXX can with equal force be applied to the original Hebrew, for the synonyms and the constructions are there precisely the same. That the two ideas of “covenant” and “authoritative disposition” which met in the same word can have been kept separated in the religious sphere without the one coloring the other is impossible to believe. What the author therefore puts in contrast as two successive stages in the development of the idea, we would prefer to regard as two coexisting elements present in the religious idea from the outset, with varyingly distributed prominence or emphasis. The “disposition”-idea is not a product of the later period. What we would say is that the Greek period through its choice of the word *διαθηκη* to render Berith gave to this element a more pointed, but also a more one-sided, expression. In doing this it expressed nothing new, but it exposed people to the danger of understanding less than the Old Testament meant to convey. The questions whether

the average Greek New Testament mind remained able to perceive the covenant-aspect of the idea, notwithstanding the hindering associations of the everyday usage of *διαθηκη*, is somewhat difficult to decide. The author admits that the use of *διαθηκη* as “contract, agreement” is not altogether unknown to pre- and extra-biblical Greek. And on the other hand he also has to admit that *διαθηκη* in the sense of “disposition” has not yet been found up to date outside of the biblical documents. We would not, however, lay stress on either of these two points in considering the above question, for the former use was certainly rare, and the non-occurrence of the noun in the latter sense must be, as the author observes, accidental, since the corresponding middle verb frequently has this meaning. The main point is, whether the use of the Old Testament even in the Greek would not necessarily impress the reader very vividly with the fact that the *διαθηκη*, whatever it might be in secular life, had its own specific religious associations, among others that it frequently involved an agreement between God and his people. If the Septuagint-translators felt this, why should it not have been felt by their readers. And if it could be felt by the Septuagint readers, why should not the peculiar coloring of the word have perpetuated itself in the use made of it by the New Testament speakers and writers? The author has not convinced us, that in all cases of the New Testament use the notion of “covenant” was certainly absent from the mind. That our Lord in the words instituting the supper, with their plain reference to Ex. 24 was entirely oblivious of the covenantal-character written so plainly on the face of the transaction there described, we find it exceedingly hard to believe. And in other instances similar doubts arise especially in connection with the *διαθηκη* that has a *μειστης* in Hebrews (where Behm makes *μειστης* = *εγγυος* without, it seems to us, sufficient warrant). The question can hardly be brought to a satisfactory solution without taking into account the possibilities of the Aramaic idiom having supplied a word either specifically expressive or at least without difficulty understandable of the covenant-idea. What possibilities in this line existed we are not competent to judge. In general it ought to be remembered that to prove the possibility of understanding *διαθηκη* in a given case as “disposition” is not without more equivalent to proving that it can not have had to the original writers or readers the sense or the associations of covenant.

In regard to Gal. 3:15, 17 we should have liked to have more weight attributed to Ramsay’s suggestion, that here not the ordinary Roman conception of a “testament”, but a Greco-Syrian conception of the same, according to which a *διαθηκη* made under certain circumstances accompanying adoption was from the outset unalterable. How the Apostle’s argument about the unalterableness of the *διαθηκη* given to Abraham, after once it was made, can apply to the Roman-law testament, which so long as the author lives remains subject to alteration, we are not able to see. To our surprise the author, while dismissing Ramsey’s suggestion in a note, does not himself face the difficulty or offer any other solution.

We wish to say—and that not perfunctorily but sincerely—that the strictures made are not indicative of a lack of appreciation on our part of the high quality and unusual instructiveness of the author’s work. The present treatise has the same merits even to a stronger degree that distinguished the author’s previous contribution on the “*Handauflegung im Neuen Testament*” noticed by us in a previous number of this Review. No New Testament scholar will peruse either without substantial profit.