

# **DESEGREGATING HISTORY IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE CASE OF THE COVENANT AND THE BATTLE OF BLOOD/NCOME RIVER**

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

The theme of “Desegregating History” implies a desire for an integrated history and in an even broader sense an ultimate grand or master narrative. In the case of South Africa with its divided past this is a much needed but very daunting ideal to achieve. A desegregated South African history is an ideal that can be achieved in more than one way. In this paper I want to suggest that one of the paths (processes) that can contribute to such a history is through the demythologising/deconstruction of Afrikaner history and historical consciousness as it was practised and perceived during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Within Afrikaner ranks the above-mentioned process was started by Afrikaner historians in the late 1970s and led to intense debate on Afrikaner political mythology in the 1980s. This debate was not just limited to academic circles, but also spilt over to the broader public and received extensive coverage in the Afrikaans press. This was especially true with regard to the attempts by Afrikaner historians to demythologise the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome (16 December 1838) as the central myth in the history of Afrikaner nationalism. This paper is an attempt to indicate how Afrikaner historians demythologised the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River by referring to the myths, their origin, development and application in the service of Afrikaner nationalism as well as the reinterpretations of these events by historians. Official attempts by the state since 1994 to facilitate a reinterpretation of the historically one-sided views on the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome and the way they were remembered in the past will also be examined. Lastly, reference will be made to the current debate on and use of 16 December in South Africa to determine the degree to which the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River have become integrated South African history.

## ***DEFINING POLITICAL MYTH AND POLITICAL MYTHOLOGY***

Various attempts have been made to define political myth. Leonard Thompson defines a political myth as “a tale told about the past to legitimize or discredit a regime” and political mythology he describes as “a cluster of such myths that reinforce one another and jointly constitute the historical element of the regime or its rival”.<sup>1</sup> Henry Tudor suggests that a myth “is an interpretation of what the myth-maker (rightly or wrongly) takes to be hard fact. It is a device men adopt in order to come to grips with reality; and we can tell that a given account is a myth, not by the amount of truth it contains, but by the fact that it is believed to be true and, above all, by the dramatic form into which it is cast”.<sup>2</sup> According to Tudor a myth is a political myth if its subject matter deals with politics. Lastly, there is the definition by Ewan Morris that defines myth “as a story which, through repetition by members of a particular group, has acquired a conventional form and content, is generally believed by members of the group to be true, and is told by members of the group in order to convey a message”.<sup>3</sup> To these definitions one can add the view of PH Kapp to whom the central characteristic of myth lies in the fact that it cannot be proved either true or false.<sup>4</sup> Measured against these definitions the Covenant and Battle of Blood River/Ncome are prime examples of political mythology.

## ***HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE COVENANT AND THE BATTLE OF BLOOD RIVER/NCOME***

The history of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome forms part of a period of Afrikaner history referred to as the Great Trek. The Great Trek phase spans the period of more or less 1836-1854 during which approximately 15 000 people (Afrikaner farmers and their families referred to as Voortrekkers) left the eastern districts of the Cape Colony and settled in the interior regions of what is today known as South Africa.<sup>5</sup> Although a wide spectrum of reasons (traditionally divided into material and spiritual reasons by

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<sup>1</sup> L M Thompson: **The Political Mythology of Apartheid**, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> H Tudor: **Political Myth**, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> E Morris: ‘It Seems History is to Blame’: Historical Myth in Ireland, p. 2 (Paper delivered at the Australian Historical Association Conference, 5-9 July 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Personal interview with Prof. PH Kapp.

<sup>5</sup> HJ van Aswegen: **Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika tot 1854**, p. 261.

historians)<sup>6</sup> for the emigration were cited by the Voortrekkers what they amounted to was a widespread dissatisfaction with the British colonial regime and a conclusion “that the government was failing to provide for their security and was threatening their way of life”.<sup>7</sup>

Between 1835-1838 Voortrekkers left the Cape Colony in large groups organised by various Trekker leaders. In 1835 groups under the leadership of Hans van Rensburg, Louis Tregardt and Andries Hendrik Potgieter left the Colony followed by Gert Maritz (1836), Piet Retief and Piet Uys (1837), and Andries Pretorius (1838). After crossing the Orange River the various groups spread in different directions to settle in the region of their preference.<sup>8</sup>

Van Rensburg and Tregardt moved into the area north of the Vaal River, while Potgieter eventually also settled north of the Vaal River and founded Potchefstroom. The majority followed Retief across the Drakensberg into Natal with the hope of obtaining land from the Zulu king, Dingane. During a visit by Retief to Dingane's kraal, Mgungundlovu, in November 1837 the Zulu King declared himself willing to discuss the granting of land to the Voortrekkers, but not before Retief returned the Zulu cattle raided by the Tlokwa. Retief fulfilled this precondition, but during his second visit to Dingane in February 1838 he and his expedition of 70 whites and 30 blacks were killed by the Zulus<sup>9</sup> after they signed an agreement with Dingane in which he granted the land between the Thukela and Umzimvubu Rivers to the Voortrekkers.<sup>10</sup> In further attacks by the Zulus 300 Voortrekker men, women and children as well as 250 blacks employed by the Voortrekkers were killed and a punitive expedition under the leadership of Potgieter and Uys was defeated at Italeni.<sup>11</sup> Afrikaner historians' demonisation of Dingane was based mainly on these actions which the Voortrekkers considered to be treacherous. From a

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<sup>6</sup> CFJ Muller: **Die Britse Owerheid en die Groot Trek**, p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> LM Thompson: **The Political Mythology of Apartheid**, pp. 146-147.

<sup>8</sup> HJ van Aswegen: **Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika tot 1854**, p. 261.

<sup>9</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 277.

<sup>10</sup> FA van Jaarsveld: **Honderd basiese dokumente by die studie van die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis 1648-1961**, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> HJ van Aswegen: **Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika tot 1854**, p. 277.

Zulu perspective these actions were seen as necessary by Dingane to save his kingdom from destruction.<sup>12</sup>

Against this background Andries Pretorius arrived in Natal in November 1838 and immediately organised another punitive expedition against Dingane. In the days before the military encounter Pretorius, the leader of the Voortrekker expedition, initiated the idea of a covenant with God. After discussing the idea with Sarel Cilliers (the spiritual leader of the Voortrekkers in Natal) and other leaders in the expedition and obtaining the general consent of the expedition members, a covenant was made with God on 9 December 1838 at a place called Wasbank. In the covenant, which took the form of a prayer by Cilliers, the Voortrekkers asked God to grant them a victory over the Zulus. In return they would build a church in memory of His name and they and their children and the generations coming after them would consecrate it to the Lord and celebrate the day with thanksgiving<sup>13</sup>.

The military encounter between the Voortrekker expedition and the Zulu army took place on 16 December 1838. The 14 000 strong Zulu army came up against a strategically well-planned laager defended by 470 Voortrekkers under Pretorius and 60 black allies led by Alexander Biggar. The defeated Zulu army lost 3 000 men, with no loss of life on the side of the Voortrekkers<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Report of the Panel of Historians appointed by the South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology: The Battle of Blood River/Ncome, pp. 4, 6.

<sup>13</sup> FA van Jaarsveld: **Die Afrikaners se Groot Trek na die stede en ander opstelle**, pp. 300-301.

<sup>14</sup> C Venter: **Die Groot Trek**, pp. 49, 52.

## ***THE HISTORY OF THE COMMEMORATION OF THE COVENANT AND THE BATTLE OF BLOOD RIVER/NCOME***

Although a church was erected in Pietermaritzburg (the capital of the newly founded Voortrekker Republic of Natalia in Natal) in 1841, there is no surviving record to indicate whether it was explicitly built by the Voortrekkers as a fulfilment of their vow. As far as the commemoration of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome in thanksgiving to God is concerned, the Natal Voortrekkers failed dismally. In the first quarter of a century after the battle only a handful of individuals like Sarel Cilliers celebrated the day and it is known that even the initiator of the idea of the Covenant, Andries Pretorius, did not uphold the promise of celebrating the day as a sacred day. The Volksraad of the Republic of Natalia also did nothing to commemorate the vow<sup>15</sup>.

After the British annexation of Natal in 1843 most of the Natal Voortrekkers crossed the Drakensberg again and settled in either the Orange Free State or Transvaal. In 1864 the Dutch Reformed Church in Natal decided that “the 16<sup>th</sup> of December should be celebrated religiously as a day of thanks”.<sup>16</sup> In 1865 the Transvaal government proclaimed December 16 a public holiday, “to commemorate that by God’s grace the immigrants were freed from the yoke of Dingane”.<sup>17</sup> According to the Afrikaner historian, FA van Jaarsveld, the development of Afrikaner nationalism in the Transvaal, which was generated by the attempts to regain their independence after the British annexation of the Transvaal in 1877, was decisive for the establishment of December 16 as a historical festive day. In 1880 the Transvaal revolted against Britain in an attempt to regain its independence. Before the start of hostilities the Transvaal burgers gathered at Paardekraal in December 1880 where, according to Van Jaarsveld, “the covenant was ‘renewed’...by piling a cairn of stones, symbolizing both past and future: the past because the covenant had freed them from Black domination, and the future because they saw it as a sign that they would continue fighting until they regained their independence

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<sup>15</sup> LM Thompson: **The Political Mythology of Apartheid**, pp. 154-156.

<sup>16</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 166.

<sup>17</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 168.

from the British imperialists”.<sup>18</sup> After a successful military campaign Transvaal regained its independence from Britain in 1881. In that year and every fifth year thereafter the Transvaal government organised a state festival on December 16 (Dingaan’s Day) to celebrate the Transvaal’s victory over Britain as well as the Voortrekker victory at Blood River.<sup>19</sup>

In 1894 the government of the Republic of the Orange Free State declared December 16 (Dingaan’s Day) a public holiday. After the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) the British authorities reinstated December 16 as a public holiday in Transvaal and the Free State. In 1910 the Union government proclaimed Dingaan’s Day a public holiday for the whole of South Africa. In 1952 the National Party government changed the name from Dingaan’s Day to the Day of the Vow in an attempt to make the day less offensive to South African blacks. The government also elevated the Day of the Vow to a “sabbath” by legally attaching the sabbath restrictions (no organised public sport, closed theatres and places of public entertainment, etc.) to the holiday. The sabbath status attached incorrectly to the day was done on the basis of the version of the Covenant given by Cilliers in his Memoirs as recounted by his biographer, Gerdener.<sup>20</sup>

### ***THE EVOLUTION OF THE COVENANT AND BATTLE OF BLOOD RIVER/NCOME MYTHOLOGY IN ARIKANER NATIONALISM IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY***

According to Van Jaarsveld, the celebration of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome served as a reliable barometer of the historical, national and political thought of the Afrikaner. He described the Day of the Vow as an example of a type of civil religion. The significance of Blood River becomes clear from Day of the Vow celebrations in which religion and history were united. An example in this regard is the 16 December 1881 state festival, where the Battle of Blood River/Ncome and the regaining of Transvaal’s independence were celebrated. Speaking at this occasion Paul Kruger, President of the

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<sup>18</sup> LM Thompson: **The Political Mythology of Apartheid**, p. 169; FA van Jaarsveld: **Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle**, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> **Ibid.**

Transvaal Republic, declared that the “volksleiers” (leaders of the people) were used by God to regain Transvaal’s independence and that He gave them the victories at Blood River and Majuba (place of the final defeat of the British during the Transvaal’s war of independence). God gave them their freedom and their country because they were “Gods volk” (God’s people). In 1891 Kruger warned that Dingaan’s Day should be celebrated as a religious and not a worldly festival. Kruger was also of the opinion that the loss of the Transvaal’s independence in 1877 and the war that followed in 1880 was a punishment by God because the promises made by the Voortrekkers in the Covenant of 1838 were not kept. There was a heavy reliance on history to strengthen the historical consciousness of the Transvaal Afrikaners, while the idea that they were God’s people and that God treated them as he did the Israelites of the Old Testament was widely propagated.<sup>21</sup>

During the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome were used by Afrikaner political, religious and community leaders (nationalist culturalists, as referred to by Grundlingh and Sapire<sup>22</sup>) to explain the political, social and economic circumstances of Afrikaners and in the process fed the fire of Afrikaner nationalism.

After the Transvaal and Orange Free State lost their independence in 1902, the Battle of Blood River/Ncome and the commemoration of Dingaan’s Day were used to inspire Afrikaners to overcome the political and economic losses they suffered by reminding them of the determination of the Voortrekkers who fought Dingaan and that they (the Voortrekkers) did not waver in their belief in the future of their “volk” (people). The comparison between the Afrikaners and the Israelites was made repeatedly and the sorry state that Afrikaners found themselves in after the Anglo-Boer War was, according to some commentators, attributed to the fact that the volk neglected the Dingaan’s Day Covenant.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> FA van Jaarsveld: **Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle**, pp. 48-49.

<sup>21</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 65-67.

<sup>22</sup> A Grundlingh and H Sapire: From Feverish Festival to Repetitive Ritual? The Changing Fortunes of Great Trek Mythology in an Industrializing South Africa, 1938 –1988 (**South African Historical Journal** 21, 1989, p. 26).

<sup>23</sup> FA van Jaarsveld: **Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle**, pp. 68-69.

After 1912 Dingaan's Day celebrations were increasingly used as a political platform for making nationalistic speeches directed at the "volk". A popular theme that Dingaan's Day was related to was the "native question". In 1910 ex-president MT Steyn of the Free State referred to the events around the Battle of Blood River/Ncome as follows: "It can be that it (the "native question) will lead to a blood bath... Maybe the growth in civilization will bring a solution that nobody has dreamt of up till now. When Pretorius broke the back of the barbarians God placed the natives...under the guardianship of the white man ... That is a burden the white man must carry. The Afrikaners will have to keep their blood 'pure', and work to stay on top. Under God's management we are heirs of centuries of civilization. The native is only now touching the fringes of civilization".<sup>24</sup>

In 1929 Hertzog discussed the meaning of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome at a Dingaan's Day celebration. He was of the opinion that "Dingaan's Day 1838 was decisive for the existence (Volksbestaan) of the European race from the Cape to Nyassa". It was more than just a military victory: "It was the birth of a new European nation (volksiel) on African soil ". He also saw it as the victory of civilization over barbarism: "the power of the assegaai" was replaced by the authority of the "law", the authority of "a new-born Afrikaner nation". He was also of the opinion that the Afrikaner wanted to keep South Africa what Dingaan's Day 1838 made of it, namely "a white man's country under the white man's authority".<sup>25</sup>

During the 1938 centenary celebrations of the Great Trek the Battle of Blood River/Ncome and the Covenant were a central reference point in what Grundlingh and Sapire describe as "an important populist phase" in the development of Afrikaner nationalism with "all the rhetoric of populist movements: 'struggle', 'survival' and 'salvation'".<sup>26</sup> In a speech at the Battle of Blood River/Ncome site in December 1938 Dr DF Malan, leader of the National Party, referred to the difficulties of keeping South

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<sup>24</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 69-70.

Africa a “white man’s country”: “At the Blood River battleground you stand on sacred soil. It is here that the future of South Africa as a civilized Christian country and the continued existence of the responsible authority of the white race was decided... You stand today in your own white laager at your own Blood River, seeing the dark masses gathering around your isolated white race.” According to Malan, the site of the “new Blood River” was the city, where black and white confront each other in the labour field. “If there is no salvation”, Malan declared, “the downfall of South Africa as a white man’s country” would be sealed. This can only be prevented through forceful intervention without which the victory of faith at Blood River would be transformed into one of despair and ruin.<sup>27</sup>

In 1938 the Reverend JD Vorster declared: “In answer to prayer and covenant God Almighty confirmed on 16 December 1838 that it is his will that the Afrikaner volk shall live...And on December 16 the Almighty gave his approval to the volk’s direction and our fathers bound us with a holy, unimpeachable covenant never to be untrue to the Volk and God. For the Afrikaner Dingaans Day is therefore a holy day of covenant”.<sup>28</sup> On 22 September 1938 Dirk Mostert declared at Pearston: “We are a chosen nation. We did not choose ourselves. God chose us. We were given a commission”.<sup>29</sup>

Van Jaarsveld describes the massive and enthusiastic participation of Afrikaners in the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek and the symbolic ox-wagon procession from Cape Town to Pretoria as a peak in emotional Afrikaner nationalism. He explains the Afrikaner response to the celebrations as a reaction to the coalition and fusion of the South African Party and National Party in 1933-1934, while the celebrations themselves were an attempt to stimulate Afrikaner nationalism, republicanism and volk’s unity. The

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<sup>26</sup> A Grundlingh and H Sapire: From Feverish Festival to Repetitive Ritual? The Changing Fortunes of Great Trek Mythology in an Industrializing South Africa, 1938-1988 (**South African Historical Journal** 21,1989, p.27).

<sup>27</sup> FA van Jaarsveld: **Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle**, p.71.

<sup>28</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>29</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 72.

Afrikaner viewed himself in the mirror of his past and drew from it inspiration for his present and future.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to Van Jaarsveld's approach, Grundlingh and Sapire explained the changing role of Great Trek mythology by placing it in its material context, emphasising class and material motivations, factors and changes. By referring to Afrikaner poverty and the effects of urbanisation they came to the conclusion that the "bruises" caused by these material conditions were "soothed by the balm of 'traditional' culture". They concluded that "Although the formalization of emotions was undoubtedly important in its own right, at bedrock were still the material realities of proletarian and rural poverty and the often frustrated position of the petty bourgeoisie that ultimately underlay responses to the celebrations".<sup>31</sup>

This pattern of use by Afrikaner politicians and community leaders (nationalist culturalists) of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome and the Covenant continued in the decades after 1938, although the symbolism attached changed with the changing perspectives as dictated by the needs of the day. With the inauguration of the Voortrekker monument in December 1949 Dingaan's Day was used as a celebration of the victory of Afrikaner nationalism and volk's unity, as demonstrated by the election victory of the National Party in 1948. By the late 1960s and early 1970s the focus shifted to South Africa's isolation and the battle against decolonisation. In 1966 Prof. MCE van Schoor compared the Afrikaners' position to that of the Voortrekkers at the time of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome. A small minority of whites fighting against a vast majority of hostile black people of Africa to secure the values of civilisation in South Africa. In 1972 Prof. AN Pelzer commented in a paper on the significance of Blood River as follows: "We are being isolated, besieged, devoured, forced into a laager - just like 133 years ago; another Blood River in our existence is not impossible...The battle that awaits us...will

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<sup>30</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> A Grundlingh and H Sapire: From Feverish Festival to Repetitive Ritual? The Changing Fortunes of Great Trek Mythology in an Industrializing South Africa, 1938- 1988 (**South African Historical Journal** 21, 1989, pp. 25, 26).

be merciless, relentless and final. It is a battle for life and death”.<sup>32</sup> Van Jaarsveld described December 16 used in this way as providing an anchor to answer questions annually about Afrikaner identity and which often served the purpose of unifying Afrikaners politically against either the English or the blacks. In this sense it served as a “power-station” where nationalistic electricity was generated every year.<sup>33</sup>

The content of this nationalistic electricity changed profoundly in the 1970s and 1980s as meanings were attached to Great Trek mythology in general “that would have a greater resonance with an increasingly sophisticated and self-confident urban Afrikanerdom”.<sup>34</sup> The economic and political crises of the late 1970s and early 1980s led to moves towards reforming the apartheid system. A move that needed wider support than just from Afrikaners. Because English and moderate black support were necessary, the ethnic exclusivity and divine mission of Afrikaners, two dominating themes in the Battle of Blood River/Ncome and the Covenant mythology, had to be played down. According to Grundlingh and Saphire, it was against this background “of Afrikaner doubt about the apartheid system in the 1980s that the call went out from the press, the pulpits, and cultural organizations for a reconsideration of the way in which the Great Trek was to be commemorated in the yearly Blood River celebrations. Thus, for example, Afrikaner intellectuals appealed for the inclusion of non-Afrikaner groups in the Day of the Covenant celebrations and for the depoliticization of the day, while Afrikaner historians began to depict the Great Trek in a secular light and to subject the event to re-examination.”<sup>35</sup> It is to this re-examination and deconstruction by historians that I now want to turn.

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<sup>32</sup> FA van Jaarsveld: **Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle**, pp. 72-74.

<sup>33</sup> FA van Jaarsveld: **Die Afrikaners se Groot Trek na die stede en ander opstelle**, p. 311.

<sup>34</sup> A Grundlingh and H Sapire: From Feverish Festival to Repetitive Ritual? The Changing Fortunes of Great Trek Mythology in an Industrializing South Africa, 1938-1988 (**South African Historical Journal** 21, 1989).

<sup>35</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 30, 31.

***THE DECONSTRUCTION / DEMYTHOLOGIZING OF THE BATTLE OF BLOOD RIVER AND THE COVENANT BY AFRIKANER HISTORIANS***

The mythology that developed around the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome since the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and formed the traditional interpretation of these events consisted of the following:

- **Myths on the significance of Blood River**

1. Blood River saved the Great Trek
2. Blood River was the birthplace of the Afrikaner people
3. Blood River was a symbol of the victory of Christianity over heathendom and barbarism

- **The myth on the binding of the Covenant**

1. All Afrikaners are irrevocably bound by the vow for all time

- **The myth on the miracle of Blood River**

1. The victory at the Battle of Blood River/Ncome was a miracle in the sense that divine intervention gave the Voortrekkers the victory
2. God's intervention at Blood River to save the Voortrekkers proved that He was on the side of the Afrikaner people and would not abandon the Afrikaner nation
3. The Blood River victory was also interpreted as proof that God had commissioned the Afrikaner people to keep South Africa white or that God desires white supremacy in South Africa.<sup>36</sup>

The process of the deconstruction of these traditional interpretations of the Battle of Blood River and the Covenant by Afrikaner historians was facilitated by the completion in 1975 and publication in 1977 of the doctoral study by BJ Liebenberg entitled **Andries Pretorius in Natal**. Liebenberg corrected the subjective and biased picture of Pretorius painted by Gustav Preller in his biography of Pretorius and in the process also rectified many factual mistakes with regard to the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome.<sup>37</sup> In December 1977 Prof Liebenberg wrote an article in *Die Huisgenoot* (*The Housemate*), a popular Afrikaans periodical, in which he gave a rational explanation, according to the findings of his doctoral dissertation, of the reasons for the Voortrekker victory at Blood River without ascribing it to the divine intervention of God. Liebenberg's explanation and his viewpoint that it was not the task of the historian to indicate the hand of God in history were greeted with letters full of reproachful and shocked reactions from readers.<sup>38</sup>

The academic debate on the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome was given further momentum when Prof. FA van Jaarsveld, the foremost Afrikaner historian of his time, became involved. In 1978 he wrote an essay on "*The Covenant in the Bounds of Time*" (*Die Geloofte in die Ban van die Tyd*) in which he indicated that the Sabbath stipulation was not applicable to the Day of the Vow.<sup>39</sup> He followed up the essay with a paper entitled "*Historical mirror of Blood River*" (*Historiese spieël van Bloedrivier*), which he delivered at the 1979 Unisa Conference on the *Problems in the Interpretation of History with Possible Reference to Examples from South African History such as the Battle of Blood River*.<sup>40</sup> In his paper he questioned and rejected the reliability of Sarel Cilliers's account of the Covenant with reference to both its content and form, and also indicated that the addition of the Sabbath stipulation to the Day of the Vow in 1952 was

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<sup>36</sup> BJ Liebenberg: Mites Rondon Bloedrivier en die Geloofte (**South African Historical Journal** 20, November 1988).

<sup>37</sup> BJ Liebenberg: **Andries Pretorius in Natal**, pp. 7-8.

<sup>38</sup> FA van Jaarsveld: **Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle**, pp. 54-55.

<sup>39</sup> BJ Liebenberg: Mites Rondon Bloedrivier en die Geloofte (**South African Historical Journal** 20, November 1988, p. 18).

<sup>40</sup> A Grundlingh and H Sapire: From Feverish Festival to Repetitive Ritual? The Changing Fortunes of Great Trek Mythology in an Industrializing South Africa, 1938-1988 (**South African Historical Journal** 21, 1989, p.31).

done on the strength of Cilliers's unreliable account.<sup>41</sup> The strength of emotion among certain Afrikaner groups on the issues he addressed was demonstrated by the fact that his presentation was interrupted when AWB (Afrikaner Weerstand Beweging /Afrikaner Resistance Movement) members under the leadership of Eugene Terreblanche stormed into the conference hall and tarred and feathered Prof. Van Jaarsveld for attacking the holy symbols of the volk.<sup>42</sup> In a third essay published in 1982 under the title "*The demythologizing of Afrikaner historical consciousness*" (Die ontmytologisering van die Afrikaner se geskiedbeeld) Van Jaarsveld reconfirmed his view on the Sabbath stipulation with regard to the Day of the Vow and also described as a myth the viewpoint that all Afrikaners are irrevocably bound by the vow for all time.

In an article in the *South African Historical Journal* of November 1980 entitled "*Blood River and God's Hand*" (Bloedrivier en Gods Hand) Prof. Liebenberg expanded on his arguments with regard to the miracle of the Voortrekker victory at Blood River as outlined in his 1977 article in *Die Huisgenoot*. Addressing the issue on an academic level he summarised his findings as follows: "The assertion that the victory of the Voortrekkers at the Battle of Blood River was a miracle which must be ascribed to the intervention of God has been made by various historians. After an analysis of the argument advanced in this connection, the author concludes that nothing incomprehensible, miraculous or supernatural occurred at Blood River. It was an ordinary battle and there are more mundane reasons for the Voortrekker victory. As to whether a historian can discern the hand of God in history, the author's answer is that this lies outside his province. It is the task of the historian to explain the thoughts, motives and actions of men - the thoughts, motives and actions of God are beyond his ken. The author finally provides three reasons why some people are anxious to attribute the Voortrekker victory at Blood River to God's intervention. One is that it is much easier to describe the victory of so few Voortrekkers over so many Zulus as a miracle than it is to explain it rationally. Another is that the Covenant made before the battle has inserted an element of mysticism into subsequent events. Finally, the Battle of Blood River has been

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<sup>41</sup> BJ Liebenberg: Mites Rondon Bloedrivier en die Geloofte (*South African Historical Journal* 20, November 1988, p. 18).

<sup>42</sup> **Rapport**, 1.4.1979: Geteer...en veer, p. 5.

interpreted in the light of an overall assumption that God is on the side of the Afrikaner nation”.<sup>43</sup>

The academic and public debate on the issues surrounding the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome continued intermittently through the 1980s, surfacing periodically in national Sunday newspapers like *Rapport*<sup>44</sup> and fed by new publications like Thompson’s *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (1985) and De Jongh’s *Sarel Cilliers* (1987). The last two publications broadly confirming the Covenant and Blood River mythology exposed in the earlier publications. In 1988, the year of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Trek, the Historical Society of South Africa organised a conference to stimulate debate on the Great Trek as historical event. In a paper entitled “*Myths on Blood River and the Covenant*”(Mites Rondon Bloedrivier en die Geloofte) Liebenberg took stock of Blood River and Covenant mythology, in the process also indicating less known and less prominent myths surrounding the events and coming to the conclusion that they were all myths “which have the common purpose of supporting Afrikaner Nationalism”.<sup>45</sup> The conference confirmed that in Afrikaner academic circles the new perspectives on the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River that emerged in the preceding decade were generally accepted.<sup>46</sup> Further confirmation of this acceptance was the inclusion of the new perspectives in an Afrikaans textbook on South African history published in 1989 and intended for first-year university students studying South African history.<sup>47</sup>

The new perspectives amounted to a recognition of the following:

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<sup>43</sup> B J Liebenberg: Bloedrivier en Gods Hand (**South African Historical Journal** 12, November 1980, p. 1).

<sup>44</sup> H van Aswegen: Geloftedag-Mites. Ander sal ook onthul word in Afrikaner se geskiedenis (**Rapport**, 20.12.1981, p. 14); B J Liebenberg: Onjuisthede oor die Geloofte (**Rapport**, 21.2.1982, p. 34).

<sup>45</sup> B J Liebenberg: Mites Rondon Bloedrivier en die Geloofte (**South African Historical Journal** 20 November 1988, p. 17).

<sup>46</sup> **Historia (Groot Trek –Gedenkuitgawe)** 33, November 1988, No 2.

<sup>47</sup> H J van Aswegen: **Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika tot 1854**, pp. 7, 278.

- **On the significance of Blood River**

1. Blood River did not save the Great Trek, since only a small group of Voortrekkers was involved, while many Voortrekkers outside Natal were not threatened by the Zulus.
2. Blood River was not the birthplace of the Afrikaner people, since the Afrikaner nation began emerging long before 1836 and many Cape Afrikaners were not touched by Blood River.
3. Blood River was not a victory of Christianity over paganism / heathendom and/or barbarism, as had been claimed by many Afrikaners, since it is an open question whether any military victory can occur in the name of Christianity, and furthermore, after the battle the Voortrekkers did little to spread the Christian message among black people.

- **On the binding force of the Covenant**

1. The vow was binding only on those who actually participated in making it. Nobody can make a binding vow on behalf of somebody else without the latter even being aware of it.

- **On the miracle of Blood River**

1. Blood River was not a miracle. In other battles fewer Voortrekkers overcame similar massive attacks. The favourable climatic conditions during the battle can be ascribed to natural circumstances.
2. God cannot be claimed to be on the side of the Afrikaners because of the Voortrekker victory at Blood River. God is not exclusive but universal. The God of Blood River is also the God of Italeni and Perdeberg. The God of the Afrikaners is also the God of the English, the Germans and the Zulu.

3. The interpretation that the Voortrekker victory at Blood River is an indication that God is against equality between black and white people, and desires white supremacy in South Africa, is an example of the subjective viewpoints and desires of people being ascribed to God and projected as His will. As such, this interpretation was rejected.<sup>48</sup>

***FROM DINGAAN'S DAY TO THE DAY OF RECONCILIATION: SOME PUBLIC AND OFFICIAL REACTIONS TO THE NOTION OF A DESEGREGATED COVENANT AND BLOOD RIVER***

It has already been mentioned that the National Party government changed the official name of December 16 as public holiday from Dingaan's Day to the Day of the Vow in 1952 in an attempt to make the day less offensive to South African blacks.<sup>49</sup> This name change was, however, not accompanied by an attitudinal change in the way Afrikaners in general celebrated the day. The public debate on the character of the celebration of the Day of the Vow only started in earnest in the mid-1970s and coincided with the academic debate on the demythologising of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome. In the sustained debate that raged throughout the 1970s and 1980s three broad approaches towards December 16 as a national public holiday crystallised. The more conservative elements within Afrikaner ranks called for the preservation of the Day of the Vow as an exclusive festival of Christian Afrikaners. For them the Day of the Vow was as exclusive to Afrikaners as the Passion Play was to Oberammergau. The second approach was that of Afrikaners and other South Africans who wanted to make the day more inclusive by incorporating English-speaking and black South Africans and changing the character of the day from that of confrontation to one of reconciliation between the peoples of South Africa. The third group, which included people like John Mavuzo of Inkatha and David Curry of the (Coloured) Labour Party, called for the abolition of December 16 as a public

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<sup>48</sup> BJ Liebenberg: Bloedrivier en Gods Hand (**South African Historical Journal** 12, 1980, p.7); BJ Liebenberg: Mites Rondom Bloedrivier en die Gelofte (**South African Historical Journal** 20, November 1988, pp. 19-32; HJ van Aswegen: **Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika tot 1854**, p.278; JEH Grobler: Afrikaner perspectives on Blood River: A never-ending debate?, pp. 2-3 (Paper delivered at one-day seminar on the Battle of Blood River/Ncome at University of Zululand, November 1998).

holiday on the grounds of its exclusivity.<sup>50</sup> Despite the lively debate December 16 remained on the South African calendar in the form that it was given in 1952.

With the introduction of the new political dispensation in 1994 December 16 was retained as a national public holiday, but the name was changed to the Day of Reconciliation to symbolise the spirit in which the government expected the day to be celebrated in future. The changing attitude of the majority of Afrikaners towards December 16 was best demonstrated by the acceptance in 1997 of a motion during the annual congress of the ATKV (Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuur Vereniging / Afrikaans Language and Cultural Association), a traditionally more conservative Afrikaner cultural organisation, namely that the Day of the Vow should in future be celebrated as a day of thanksgiving similar to the American example. It should no longer be a day used to remind Afrikaners of Blood River and the Covenant. Expressing himself in favour of the proposal, one of the delegates was of the opinion that “Whether we want to admit it or not, the Day of the Vow was for many years just a public holiday to people” with only one percent of Afrikaans speakers actively commemorating the day. The aim of the proposal was “to give meaning to a day which normally does not have great significance to people”. According to the proposal ATKV branches were requested to organise public meetings in co-operation with like-minded organisations on December 16. On these occasions special attention was to be given to “thanksgiving to God for his mercy and goodness in the past, present and future”. One of the delegates described the proposal as an attempt to create a culture of thanksgiving among all people in South Africa. He added that the day should be characterised by large meetings and street processions, as in the USA. The diversity of colours of the national flag could be displayed at these occasions. He saw this as a way of unifying people and of giving sense and meaning to the intention behind the Day of Reconciliation.<sup>51</sup>

Official involvement in desegregating the historiography and the commemoration of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome took a tangible form when the Department of Arts, Culture,

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<sup>49</sup> FA van Jaarsveld: **Die Afrikaners se Groot Trek na die stede en ander opstelle**, p. 311.

<sup>50</sup> FA van Jaarsveld: **Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle**, pp. 74-80.

<sup>51</sup> M Waldner: Geloftedag kan soos ‘n ‘dankdag’ word (**Rapport**, 24.8.1997, p. 2)

Science and Technology identified the re-interpretation of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome as a Legacy Project under its co-ordination for delivery in 1998. According to the Department, the project involved “a re-interpretation of some of the historically one-sided views of the 1838 Zulu-Boer war, and the erection of an appropriate memorial at the site of the Battle. Also, built around the project is the idea of building and effecting a spirit of reconciliation among the descendants of those involved in the Battle”. After the Department briefed Cabinet early in 1998, it undertook consultations with all affected role players. The Minister also appointed a panel of academics to work on the conceptual framework for the re-interpretation. In October 1998 the Department hosted a one-day seminar at the University of Zululand with the aim of “allowing the many academic views that still exist about this Battle to be synthesized and aligned with the conceptual framework” produced by the panel of academics appointed by the Minister.<sup>52</sup>

The panel of academics appointed by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology and consisting of *inter alia* Professors JS Maphalala, M Kunene, J Laband, CA Hamilton and Dr JEH Grobler produced the following conceptual framework for their report:

“On 16 December 1838 the marshalled forces of the Zulu army engaged a laagered Voortrekker commando on the banks of a small river in what is today northern KwaZulu-Natal. In the encounter that followed, known variously as iMpi yase Ncome, die Geveg van Bloedrivier and the Battle of Blood River, the numerically tiny Voortrekker force (of about 600) inflicted heavy losses on the Zulu army of some 14000 men.

The Voortrekkers attributed their victory to divine intervention in response to a covenant made with God some days before the battle. This covenant became a cornerstone of Afrikaner nationalism resulting in its annual commemoration on a declared public holiday, known initially as Dingaan’s Day, later as the Day of the Vow and currently as the Day of Reconciliation. Two monuments, both

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<sup>52</sup> Invitation Prof. MK Xulu-Prof. PH Kapp, 9.10.1998 and annexure entitled: Legacy project: Re-interpreting the Battle of Ncome/Blood River.

representing wagons, have been erected by the Afrikaner community at the site of the battle.

While for some the covenant became a cornerstone of Afrikaner nationalism, for others the monument became a symbol of Afrikaner domination that chimed closely with the biased textbooks and other historical materials produced under apartheid which celebrated the hardy, pioneering spirit of the Afrikaners and denigrated the black inhabitants of the region as savage barbarians.

Any attempt to refigure the commemoration of this battle must both challenge these stereotypes and accord full recognition to the hitherto neglected Zulu side of the battle. In the body of this report, we provide background material that both contextualises the rise of the stereotypes and provides material on how the Zulu participants understood the battle. In the conclusion, we go on to assess the significance of the battle and its commemoration in post-apartheid South Africa.”<sup>53</sup>

In the body of the report the various issues were then treated under the following headings: The Covenant, Afrikaner Nationalism and the Mythification of the Voortrekker victory at *Bloedrivier*; Zulu interpretations of *iMpi yase Ncome*; The Origins of the Battle; The Battle Itself; and The Battle: A Military Analysis. With regard to the significance of the battle and its commemoration in post-apartheid South Africa, the panel came to the following conclusion:

“On the one hand it is important because it resulted in the first time that a Zulu king’s capital was completely destroyed by invading whites. On the other hand, although the Voortrekkers crushed Dingane’s armed force, they did not break the spirit of the Zulu, who rose from defeat to constitute a major South African force again by the 1870s. Symbolically the battle came to mark the beginning of Afrikaner dominance. It is notorious for the role it played in establishing

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<sup>53</sup> Report of the Panel of Historians appointed by the South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology: The Battle of Blood/Ncome River, 1.9.1998, pp.1-2.

historical stereotypes about Zulu barbarism and treachery and about the Afrikaners as God's chosen people in South Africa.

The panel unanimously feels that the government should openly support a movement away from one-sided and stereotypical representations of events in South African history, such as this battle. Instead the government should support and stimulate the viewpoint that conflicting interpretations are the life-blood of historical debate, and should neither be suppressed nor disregarded in the practice of history. From this point of view it is clearly imperative that a major effort be undertaken to ensure that far greater attention is given to Zulu interpretations of the battle. At the battle-site itself there is a need for such materials to be provided.

The descendants of the original protagonists in the Battle of Blood River/Ncome, namely the Zulu and the Afrikaners of today, are no longer enemies. From a view some 160 years after the confrontation, the main lessons to be learned from it are no longer about the courage and the suffering of the participants, but rather an imperative not to prolong the conflicts of the past. That leads the panel to propose that a further monument should be erected at the site that carries out a message of reconciliation for everybody. The name *eKukhumelaneni umlotha* (Place of Reconciliation) should be considered for this monument.

After a war it is often necessary for the protagonists to reconcile with each other and also within themselves with what had taken place – the taking of human lives, the destruction, horror and tragedy which they helped to cause. By jointly participating in erecting a monument that would make noble the loss of Zulu life and extol Zulu bravery as much as the present monuments at the site do for the Voortrekkers; by moving beyond a mere valorisation of war; and by creating a spirit of reconciliation, the descendants of the original protagonists can play an immense part in the building of a united South Africa.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Report of the Panel of Historians appointed by the South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology: The Battle of Blood River/Ncome, 1.9.1998, pp. 9-10.

The idea of a monument to give recognition to the role of the Zulu warriors in the Battle of Blood River/Ncome as proposed by the panel was taken up by the government. The inauguration and unveiling of the new monument at the Blood River battle site a kilometre away from the existing monument commemorating the Voortrekker victory took place on 16 December 1998, on the 160<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the battle. At the inauguration ceremony attended by “thousands of people”<sup>55</sup> were also present Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, Minister of Home Affairs and Inkatha Freedom Party leader Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Minister of Arts, Culture Science and Technology Mr Lionel Mtshali, Freedom Front leader General Constand Viljoen and executive director of the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge (Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Societies) Hennie de Wet. Speakers like Mbeki and Buthelezi stressed the conciliatory character and potential of the occasion and the monument. Buthelezi even aired the idea of a new covenant: “Let us consider this the day of a new covenant that binds us to the shared commitment of building a new country through a shared struggle against poverty, inequality, corruption, crime and lack of discipline at all levels”.<sup>56</sup> Mtshali was of the opinion that: “Two monuments at the site of the battle, commemorating the participation of both sides will complete the symbolism. They will unite the protagonists of 160 years ago. In so doing, they will hopefully help reconcile conflicting historical interpretations. Today’s event marks freedom from the yoke of many years of the divisive symbolism and dangerous stereotyping.”<sup>57</sup> The speakers at the ceremony, however, also lamented the fact that the occasion’s potential for reconciliation was not fully realised because of the sparse Afrikaner attendance and the existence of a separate ceremony by Afrikaners at the Voortrekker laager monument a kilometre away.<sup>58</sup>

The *Cape Argus* described the Afrikaner ceremony as “a small group of apartheid flag-waving Afrikaners conducting a prayer at the wagon site”.<sup>59</sup> The *Sowetan* reported as

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<sup>55</sup> **Cape Argus** 17.12.1998: Afrikaner stay-away from Blood River ceremony, p.4.

<sup>56</sup> **Sowetan** 17.12.1998: Peace on battlefield, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> **Cape Argus** 17.12.1998: Afrikaner stay-away from Blood River ceremony, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> **Ibid.**; **Sowetan** 17.12.1998: Peace on battlefield, p. 1; **Cape Argus** 19/20.12.1998: No reconciliation at Blood River, p. 24.

<sup>59</sup> **Cape Argus** 19/20.12.1998: No reconciliation at Blood River, p. 24.

follows: “Flags of the old Boer republics, among them the Vierkleur, flew. One banner read *Apartheid is heilig* – Apartheid is holy...Among those who attended the Afrikaner ceremony was convicted mass murderer and Wit Wolwe member, Barend Strydom.”<sup>60</sup> The uncompromising nature of the ceremony at the Voortrekker laager did not reflect the views of all the Afrikaners at the ceremony. In an eyewitness account Dutch Reformed Church pastor LG Schoeman of Ladysmith described the events and his reactions to it as follows:

“I took my family to Blood River on 16 December 1998 full of enthusiasm: Today we as Afrikaners are going to hold a service on ‘our’ side and the Zulu on ‘their’ side and then we are going to reconcile. I hear about joint commissions, a bridge joining the two monuments, and in ecumenical circles excitement over the occasion.

Alas, on our way back we were all ashamed that we attended: Ashamed because such an emotionally charged opportunity to testify for Christian-Afrikaners was again hijacked by a handful of extremists stumbling into the future ideologically blinded.

After the disappointing public worship, during which Afrikaner volk’s theology was openly preached, the ‘Daughters of Zion’ displayed banners unhindered with the message: ‘Apartheid is Holy’ and pamphlets were distributed with the undertaking ‘from now on in our country to apply Your command to live separately strictly and purposefully’. The rest of the programme did not show any sign of reconciliation.

Together with a friend we set off on our own to the Zulu meeting at the new Ncome monument. Here the atmosphere was different. We were a few white faces in the crowd of Zulu festival-goers. Hands of reconciliation and goodwill were extended to my nation (volk).

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<sup>60</sup> **Sowetan** 17.12.1998: Peace on battlefield, p. 1.

But Afrikaner representation was sparse and they were clearly more concerned about the Afrikaner's right to maintain their own than to talk about reconciliation.

During the Zulu evening news on the SABC Mangosuthu Buthelezi said that he was disappointed about the exclusivity in the Afrikaner laager, but that he believes that Rome was not built in one day.

Can we allow the hijacking of the Blood River festival by a minority of ideologically sick minds to continue, especially in the light of the Zulu monument on the opposite side which cries out for reconciliation? Was it not time for Blood River to acquire a reconciliatory Christian character?

For Heavens sake, do something. I try to raise my children to discover their identity as Christians and Afrikaners. Embarrassments like this do not make it easy.”<sup>61</sup>

Many more examples can be quoted to demonstrate that the controversy and the lack of a consensus among Afrikaners on the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome which have prevailed for the past fifty years are still present in the year 2000. One just has to read *Die Afrikaner* (official organ of the right-wing Herstigte Nasionale Party ) of December 1998 to realise that the traditional interpretations of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River with its references to the miraculous nature of the victory and the Afrikaner as God's chosen people still have their adherents.<sup>62</sup> In contrast are the views of people like Dr J Grobler, provincial leader of the Transvaal Voortrekkers (an Afrikaner youth movement similar to the English Boy Scouts) and history lecturer at Pretoria University, who applauded the establishment of a Zulu monument and a reinterpretation of the events, and of Prof P Naude, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Port Elizabeth, who rejects the binding nature of the Covenant on the Afrikaners of today.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> **Rapport** 27.12.1998: Laat Bloedrivier versoen, p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> **Die Afrikaner** 11-17.12.1998: Hoofartikel (Twee Godswonders in een maand herdenk), p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> **Die Taalgenoot** 12.1998: Geloftedag vandag, pp. 6-9.

Dr Grobler probably came closest to the current pulse of thought among Afrikaners on the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome when, in reference to the traditional interpretation of the events and the differences of opinion, he came to the conclusion that: “That interpretation is no longer generally supported. Indeed, there are many Afrikaners today who seem to attach no importance whatsoever to the annual commemoration of the Blood River events... One is indeed tempted to conclude that it would be easier for open-minded Afrikaners to agree with the Zulus than with ultra-conservative Afrikaners on the message of Blood River”.<sup>64</sup> The traditional interpretation of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome have indeed lost their grip on the historical consciousness of the majority of white Afrikaners.

### ***CONCLUSION***

Is it possible to draw any conclusions or learn any lessons from the history of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome with regard to a desegregated South African history? An issue such as the role that historians can play in desegregating history in South Africa springs to mind. On the one hand, the history of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome seems to suggest that historians have a limited influence/capacity in desegregating history in South Africa. If one takes into account that the academic debate in Afrikaner circles on the demythologising of the events was already played out and largely settled in the early 1980s, the question arises why the public debate has not yet come to a rest despite the fact that historians have “done their job”. To what can one ascribe the fact that not all Afrikaners were converted to the new interpretations on the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome? Is it because acceptance of the new interpretations of the events and December 16 as the Day of Reconciliation has become the trade mark of those Afrikaners who accept (although in some cases reluctantly and with a feeling of deprivation) the New South Africa, whereas those adhering to the traditional interpretations and the Day of the Vow see it as a political statement through which they reject the New South Africa and the whole notion

of reconciliation? Are Afrikaners still using the events to make sense of and give meaning to their everyday lives? Those accepting the new interpretations to justify their desire for reconciliation. Those sticking to the traditional interpretations to justify their desire for separateness. Is the extent of the influence of the labour of historians therefore determined by the political debates/climate of the day?

On the other hand, the history of the Covenant and Battle of Blood River/Ncome can also be interpreted as providing proof of the enormous influence historians can exercise in desegregating history in South Africa. One can argue that the reason why the public debate on the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome has not yet been settled is attributable to the thorough work done by earlier Afrikaner historians (writing from a nationalistic perspective) in segregating South African history as well as to the diligence with which their interpretations were translated into school textbooks and were accepted by the powers that be as the Official Grand Narrative of the South African past. That it is because of their “thorough work” that it is now so difficult to change the perceptions and stereotypes created by their labour? If historians were able to exercise such influence in creating a segregated history, the same must also be possible for an integrated history.

I am of the opinion that historians have a crucial role to play but that it is not an unlimited role. The best they can do is to ensure that they don't write “in the service of”-history. That they don't write “positive to the self and negative to the others”-history. That they write historically accountable history. It is after all their narratives that form the basis for the creation of historical consciousness.

Another question that comes to mind is the role the powers that be have to play in desegregating history. The case of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome is a reminder of the damage that was done by ideologically driven Afrikaner political, religious and community leaders when they got hold of the narratives of Afrikaner nationalist historians. An integrated South African history provides no guarantee that this

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<sup>64</sup> JEH Grobler: Afrikaner perspectives on Blood River: A never-ending debate? (Paper delivered at one-day seminar on the Battle of Blood River/Ncome at University of Zululand, November 1998, pp.1, 7).

will not happen again. The only guarantee historians can provide is to write history as suggested in the preceding paragraph. The recent involvement of the South African government in facilitating a reinterpretation of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome suggests that co-operation between academic historians, the government and the public can make a positive contribution towards an integrated South African history. The result of the joint exercise was a narrative of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome with a greater degree of historical accountability that took cognisance of and included both Voortrekker and Zulu perspectives without the one replacing or dominating the other. It also produced a visual public legacy in the form of a monument that contribute to reflecting the past in a more balanced manner than before. Exercises like these, however, are only permissible as long as the government facilitates and not dictate. Whether governments have the capability for such restraint is another question.

An integrated history of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome seems to include both the negative and the positive elements of the historical experience. It must not be a history to enable people “to forget many things”.<sup>65</sup> It must rather be a history to enable people to “make sure that they (you) know what they (you) are forgetting”<sup>66</sup>. Only with such an approach can an integrated South African history reflect the kaleidoscopic South African past and, in the words of Frank Ankersmit, can “we (you) become what we (you) are no longer”.

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<sup>65</sup> Ernest Renan as quoted in E Heese: *The Voortrekker on Film: From Preller to Pornography* (**Critical Arts** 10:1 (1996)).

<sup>66</sup> With recognition to Jörn Rüsen and Frank Ankersmit.

The South African Military History Society. Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereniging. Military History Society Tour Notes May 1978. The battle of blood river. George Chadwick. INTRODUCTION. Probably the most important and best known battle ever to be fought on South African soil, Blood River presents a number of fascinating and apparently insoluble problems.Â Some 400 metres away to the north, the Ncome broadened out to form a large marsh studded by several deep pools. Away to the south and about 1 000 metres downstream a wide reed-grown marsh stretched on both sides of the river. Immediately in front of them the river ran fairly high between low reed-grown banks. The river in question was actually the Ncome River, which was said to have flowed red with the blood of 3,000 Zulus after the clash. The Battle of Blood River Memorial depicts the main tactic used by the Boers, known as a "œlaager" or wagon circle. Comprised of 64 bronze wagons, the Battle of Blood River Memorial is located on the original battle site. There are also the nearby Blood River Museum and Ncome Museum, each chronicling the battle from the respective Boer and Zulu perspectives. Featured In. South Africa Historic Sites.Â Discover the best Historic Sites in South Africa, from District Six to the Nelson Mandela Museum and more, includes an interactive map of South African cultural locations. Name. Battle of Blood River Memorial. Alternative Name. The battle of Blood River was one of the great tragedies in the history of the many Voortrekkers leaving the Cape colony, to move to the Natal region on the eastern coast of South Africa. At that time Natal was largely inhabited by the Zulus, who had developed into one of the strongest and most powerful black nations of Africa. So the land in Natal was not for the taking. And the Voortrekkers had to negotiate with King Dingane of the Zulu nation, to buy land from them. He promised them land between the Tugela river and the Umzimvubu river in the south of Zululand. Having left the Cape on March