

## ISRAEL AS LIGHT TO THE NATIONS: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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For those interested in the relationship between the OT and NT, Paul M. van Buren in the second volume of his projected four-volume systematic theology<sup>1</sup> takes a new look at an old issue in the history of doctrine. As an ardent spokesman for ecumenical pluralism van Buren seeks to (re)construct Jewish-Christian relations on the foundation of an enlightened understanding of the nature of human experience and religious language. The religion department of Temple University, of which van Buren was a senior member, has been a leading voice in promoting inter-faith dialogue. (The *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* is published by the University.) Although evangelical theology and modern theology are worlds apart, much may be gained through serious interaction with the various forms of modern thought. Radical theologians like van Buren can be of service in provoking today's evangelicals to fresh consideration of traditionally-held Christian doctrines and in providing a meaningful context in which they can articulate and reaffirm the Biblical basis for those historic doctrines of the faith.

Van Buren's study of historical theology began with his doctoral work under Karl Barth on the topic of Calvin's Christology.<sup>2</sup> From a Barthian perspective on the "biblical testimony to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ" van Buren set out by means of linguistic analysis to elucidate the meaning of the Christian message for secular man in a subsequent, controversial book.<sup>3</sup> At this stage in van Buren's theological quest an attempt was made to isolate the existential meaning of "God-language" in ancient thought. Critical of the Bultmannian school, van Buren urged a thorough revision of our understanding of the function and meaning of religious language itself.

The theological "left" has urged us to think through Christian faith in the light of the critique of modern thought. Again, "Amen"; but we would take this demand seriously. It will not do simply to translate the difficult word "God" into some highly or subtly qualified phrase such as our "ultimate concern," or worse, "transcendent reality," or even, "the ground and end of all things." These expressions are masquerading as empirical name tags, and they are used as though they referred to

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<sup>1</sup>P. M. van Buren, *A Christian Theology of the People Israel: Part II, A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality* (New York: Seabury, 1983), xvii + 362 pp., n.p. Page numbers inserted in the text of my article refer to this volume (unless otherwise indicated).

<sup>2</sup>P. M. van Buren, *Christ in Our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin's Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).

<sup>3</sup>P. M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel: Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

something, but they lead us right back into the problem of ancient thought, or they put us in the worse situation of speaking a meaningless language. Light can be thrown on the assertions of ancient thought, however, and help can be found in finding a way to speak which is honest and loyal to the way we think today, by a careful analysis of the function of the words and statements of Christian faith. We may learn what sort they are, and their meaning, which is their use, will become clear. In this way, we more than meet the concerns of Bultmann and Ogden, even if we do so in a way quite different from that which they suggest, and with rather different results.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of a transcendent God, argued van Buren, is untenable in the modern scientific age. In common with the "death-of-God" theologians of the 1960s van Buren rejected the orthodox conception of God as eternal, impassible, transcendent Being. Indications of this thinking were already apparent in his doctoral study.

In the prolegomena to his recent study in systematics<sup>5</sup> van Buren remarks that "God-talk" is something we learn from our parents. It is the expression of an otherwise common human experience. The language of faith in the Jewish-Christian traditions is expressive of human experience within a particular linguistic community.<sup>6</sup> The task of Jewish and Christian theologians is to call us to our common "walk in the Way." Van Buren admits to having been mistaken in his earlier attempt in *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* to secularize this way of faith.<sup>7</sup> He has now come to realize that "we have been called into a Way that is not that of the world."<sup>8</sup> Once hesitant to attempt a definition of "God," van Buren freely acknowledges that "the One whom we worship and dare to call our Father, the only God we know, is the Lord, the God of Israel, who by His Spirit through His Son has drawn us Gentiles into His Way."<sup>9</sup> Yet, remarks van Buren,

there are indeed problems in how we speak of God, but they are the result neither of attempting to put our creaturely language to a task for which it is not suited, nor of the inconsistency of such talk with the premise of secularity. The problems which we need to take seriously are those which have to do with the coherence of our talk of God with the Way He has given us to walk, that is, with our own premises. These problems of coherence can be considered by reflecting on how we speak of God's person and presence, His power and freedom and His love and suffering.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>5</sup>P. M. van Buren, *Discerning the Way: A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

In short, confesses van Buren, "God is a person."<sup>11</sup>

With this new apprehension of "God" van Buren describes the nature of Israel's testimony to God in the present sequel to *Discerning the Way*. Israel's story is a "narrative metaphysics" (p. 50). "Since Israel's affirmation of God as Creator and the world as God's creation is, logically, a metaphysical one, it cannot be either in agreement or in disagreement with the natural sciences, for science, when it is true to itself, is not a metaphysical enterprise" (p. 52). Metaphysical language, the language of faith, reflects human experience; it is a linguistic phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Faith affirms "the incarnate, temporal involvement of God in Creation, in his election of Israel, and in his call to both Israel and the church to work and pray that his reign of righteousness come and his will of justice and love be done on earth" (p. 268). Central to Israel's faith and the Church's is the covenant of God with Israel.<sup>13</sup> Van Buren's theology of the covenant, as he himself notes repeatedly in his writings, bears no affinity to that of classical Reformed theology, which position he finds abhorrent (pp. 76-77).<sup>14</sup> The law-gospel dichotomy in Protestant theology, postulates van Buren, reflects an outmoded world-view founded upon the Roman legal tradition (p. 210). (Contrast the reviewer's analysis of covenant theology in his "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," *WTJ* 43 [1980] 1-57.) Here is the nub of the current debate in Biblical and theological studies concerning the relationship between the Testaments. In the following quotation van Buren assesses the significance and dimensions of the controversy:

In recent years, there have also appeared some Christians who, having learned something about Judaism and its teachings, and having assumed that Paul knew at least as much about it as they did, have also begun to reject the church's traditional picture of Paul and this traditional other "gospel." Some have, but certainly not the majority. The church is presently engaged in a debate, conducted largely among biblical scholars and generally ignored by most of the church, as to which is the real Paul. Much is at stake in this debate, including ecclesiastical traditions, beloved teachers, and esteemed fathers. Indeed, the debate is ultimately about which is the real gospel! (p. 281)

In van Buren's interpretation of "covenant" in the Scriptures—that is, the OT writings in distinction from the NT writings, which van Buren labels "the Apostolic Writings"—the event of God's self-revelation to his people at Sinai defines Israel's existence and purpose in history. Beyond its formative significance for the people Israel, "covenant" serves as a useful paradigm for understanding the historical role and mission of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>12</sup>See further P. M. van Buren, *The Edges of Language: An Essay in the Logic of a Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

<sup>13</sup>Cf. also *Secular* 45.

<sup>14</sup>See also *Discerning* 20-21; *Secular* 46 n. 26.

<sup>15</sup>*Secular* 50-51.

Jesus stood before and in the midst of his people as God's model of "being Israel." By no means does he stand there in order to draw his fellow Jews away from being Jewish for the sake of some "goyish" enterprise called Christianity. On the contrary, Jesus' call to his people in his lifetime and to this day is rather that they be Jews as he was a Jew, that they be *God's Jews* (p. 258; italics his).

In the apostle Paul's teaching on unity "in Christ," observes van Buren, we discover

the heart of the mystery of Israel and of Jesus' role as Israel-for-the-Gentiles. God set Jesus in the world to be there for all the others by making him to be Israel in exemplary fashion. Jesus could be for all the others because Israel was and had always been for all the others. Abraham had been called for the sake of the world. Now in Jesus this calling of Israel had been put into effect for all the Gentiles (p. 260).

As van Buren makes clear at the outset of his study, the mission of the Church "would serve, and therefore never seek to hinder, Israel's own mission. Its mission to the Jewish people, therefore, would be to help Israel to be itself and carry out its role in God's plan for the redemption of creation" (p. 42).

What, then, is the relationship between Israel and the Church? Traditionally that relationship has been defined in terms of "promise and fulfillment." This terminology, suggests van Buren, is at best inadequate and at worst distorted in its theological grasp of the true relationship between the Testaments.

As a confirmation of the Scriptures [the OT writings], the Apostolic Writings testify to Jesus Christ as God's Yes to all his promises. To confirm a promise, however, is not the same as to fulfill it. God's promises to Israel include, for example, possession of the Land. In Jesus Christ, if we are to believe the apostle Paul, God said Yes also to that promise. The church of Jesus Christ, therefore, cannot coherently do other than confirm and support the promise of the Land to the Jewish people. It cannot twist this promise to the Jews into a spiritualized promise to the church, for to do so would be to witness to Jesus Christ as God's No to this particular and by no means peripheral promise of his. Coherence requires that the church be at the least much more cautious with its use of the word "fulfillment" than it has been in the past. Instead of struggling with weaker expressions, such as "partial fulfillment," or "fulfillment in principle," the church will be better served if a Christian theology of Israel proposes a better model. We therefore propose and will use an alternative model: that of promise and confirmation. We do so because it seems to us to be clear that God's church cannot be itself without confirming his choice of, covenant with, and promises to his people Israel (p. 30).

Classical Protestant theology, argues van Buren, has erroneously maintained a mere typological meaning for the land of Canaan. That viewpoint, along with its theological system of interpretation, is totally misguided. To be sure, the connection between Israel and the land is elusive. "The ambiguity of Israel's present life in the land raises the question whether it was ever otherwise, and therefore whether God's revelation has not always shared in this ambiguity" (p. 187). Consistent with van Buren's Barthian persuasion of earlier years he writes: "The reality and therefore the ambiguity of landed life is the only context which God has chosen for his revelation to his people Israel. We are forced to conclude, therefore, that God has chosen ambiguity for all of his revelation" (p. 188). Such is the dialectic between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility, or what

van Buren prefers to speak of as the freedom of God and the freedom of God's people. This ambiguity pertaining to Israel and the land, however, does not negate Israel's right and claim to Palestine. The election of Israel is bound up with God's promise of the land. Israel's tenure in the land throughout history rests ultimately upon the inscrutable and incomprehensible will of God. "Reversing eighteen centuries of its teaching, the church is now asserting officially [?] that if Israel was once elected, its election endures. God's covenant with Israel, it is being argued, is eternal, for this is surely the message of Israel's (and the church's!) Scriptures" (p. 22).

According to van Buren, Israel is a nation, not a religion (p. 31). As a people of the land, Israel is unique—unlike all the other nations (p. 124). To her belong the covenant, the promises, the Scriptures. But God's revelation to his elect people does not end with the canonical Scriptures (p. 9).<sup>16</sup>

In acknowledging Israel's Scriptures as its Canon, however, the church failed to consider the implications of the fact that Israel, without respect to the church, continued to read, preserve, interpret, and live from those Scriptures . . . . For the church, [its failure] produced ears deaf to the witness of God's people and a consequent misunderstanding of God's Torah, leading to a theological misconstruction of "Law" and "Gospel," a polarity of the church's invention (p. 26).

God continues to speak to his people Israel. Of at least equal significance to the Exodus event for the modern Jew are the revelatory events ("Event") of the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel.<sup>17</sup>

Van Buren takes exception to Barth's understanding of the criterion of theology. "Because we see the commission of Israel and the church more broadly than Barth, we cannot so narrowly conceive the Bible itself as the Word of God, but must see it also as Torah, as instruction, as pointers to the Way into which God has called Israel and the church to walk with him through history" (p. 8). For this reason van Buren develops his theology of the Jewish-Christian reality around the concept of the Way. Just how clear and decisive is van Buren's criterion for theology?

The honest answer is that ours is not as clear as Barth's. We cannot honestly point to the Bible and say, there is our norm. Our norm includes and is even centered on the Bible, but it is the Bible as it has been carried and interpreted, not only by the church, but also by the Jewish people . . . . Our intent is to discern the finger and voice of the Lord God of Israel in the postbiblical history of both Israel and the church, as well as in the Scriptures and the Apostolic Writings (pp. 8-9).

From this theological position, how are we to understand the Church's confession of the triune God, one God in three persons? In light of his objections to Barth's view, notes van Buren,

we conclude that we were not wrong in developing the Prolegomenon to our *Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality* around the concept of the Way, rather than that of the Word of God, or revelation, and that we had no alternative but to develop the doctrine of the Trinity within it as a testimony to the action of the God of Israel, and

<sup>16</sup>See also *Discerning* 161, 176.

<sup>17</sup>*Discerning* 176.

therefore to the God who acted so to call the Gentiles into his service, alongside Israel, by his Spirit, through Jesus Christ. The result may be called a historical-functional doctrine of the Trinity, not constructed out of a strained analysis of a theological concept, but as testimony to the conviction that God was truly himself in doing this strange new thing of producing, alongside his people Israel, also his Gentile church (p. 8).

Similarly van Buren replaces the orthodox conception of the "divinity of Christ" with a vague notion of Jesus as "Son of God"—that is, Son of "Israel's God" (p. 261). In the work under review the author thus resumes his case for a thoroughgoing revision of orthodox Christology along neo-Barthian lines, as suggested in *Christ in Our Place*, being more explicit now on his views regarding the Trinity. The catholic, orthodox interpretation of God and Christ are relegated to the world of ancient thought that no longer speaks the language of modern faith.

Just how far afield van Buren's work in theology is should be apparent to the readers of this *Journal*. Fundamentally, van Buren's view of "revelation" makes havoc of Christian theology. Working from an immanentistic conception of God, van Buren identifies human experience as the source of theology rather than the transcendent God speaking in the Scriptures, OT and NT, as taught by orthodox Christianity. However, van Buren's "language-game," if one will pardon this popular expression for the serious discipline of knowing God (theology), is regrettably not wholly foreign to certain formulations of contemporary evangelical and Reformed theology. Traditional views regarding the abiding validity of the law-gospel contrast, the person and work of Christ, and the normativity and infallibility of the canonical Scriptures—to name but a few of the issues raised in van Buren's systematics—are all being challenged in one form or another by some who number themselves among the evangelicals. Several recent, "evangelical" reinterpretations of doctrine betray presuppositions inimical to a genuinely Biblical theology. Even on an issue such as the relation between Jews and the land many evangelical, Reformed and modern interpreters are finding that they share much in common. (See my comments on this matter in "Legitimate Discontinuities Between the Testaments," *JETS* 28/1 [March 1985] 9-20.) Perhaps closer, critical discussion of modern theology by evangelicals would bring about both clarification and rethinking of these basic theological issues.

The prospects of van Buren's exposition of a Christian theology of the people Israel extend beyond the particularism of the Jewish-Christian tradition (if we are to accent the continuity between Israel and the Church). As an aspect of the current, wider context of American theology,<sup>18</sup> van Buren says: "One of the more difficult challenges which they [Christians and Jews] will do well to face together is that of their understanding of the way in which the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has been and is at work in the People of the Book (Islam), and in the peoples of many books (Hindus and Buddhists, and others)" (pp. 262-263). An underlying premise in van Buren's work is acceptance of the diverse, pluriform character of truth. Conflicts between competing religious systems can be resolved by way of theological contextualization. And the hinge that opens the door

<sup>18</sup>P. M. van Buren, *The Burden of Freedom: Americans and the God of Israel* (New York: Seabury, 1976) 1 ff.

to ecumenical dialogue is the modern understanding of the language of faith obtained through linguistic analysis. Before taking up the questions of other religions in a final volume of his systematics, van Buren will turn his attention once more to the matter of Christology in the third volume. In the meantime the thrust of van Buren's theology of the people of Israel is to encourage the Jew to affirm his "spiritual" (that is, national) identity for the sake of the world's redemption. "Jewish faithfulness to Torah involves a rejection of traditional Christianity and of the church's understanding of Paul's gospel" (p. 268). The author leaves us to ponder anew the question of the Church's traditional understanding of the Jewish people. "The church today has to decide now whether the covenant between God and Israel, which Paul believed to be irrevocable in his day, is still in force" (p. 283). In the last analysis, van Buren's work raises the question concerning the particularity of the Christian faith and in so doing calls for a response from those committed to the defense of historic, orthodox doctrine.