

# Christians and Jews: Competitive Siblings or the Israel of God?

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## Abstract

*Dabru Emet*, the important statement by Jewish scholars on the religious significance of Christianity and the Jewish relation to the Church, stimulated an articulate debate among Jews: Jon Levenson fears that the anodyne character of *Dabru Emet* lacks a conceptually coherent pluralism and commits Jews to positions which alter the fundamental character of Judaism. Does dialogical engagement with another tradition substantially modify the features of a religion? The Christian theologian Paul van Buren outlines three stages in the relationship of the two faiths which seem to lead to radical revision, certainly of Christianity. Van Buren's approach raises the question of the weighting accorded to different 'moments' in the dynamic of revelation springing from Israel. If Christianity is 'reconfigured Judaism', and the relation to Judaism is at the heart of Christian identity, then the two traditions exercise a conjoined, single mission on behalf of the truth of God. Israel according to the flesh *and* the community of reconfigured Israel are two communities, focused upon different but inseparable moments in 'the design of the Lord of the covenant', which might be designated as 'the Israel of God'.

## Keywords

Christian-Jewish Relations; *Dabru Emet*, Dialogue, Pluralism, Abraham

The political scientist and historian Robert Conquest formulated what he modestly calls Conquest's three laws of politics:

1. Everyone is conservative about what he or she knows best. (Hence the parish priest who said, 'I'm against all change, especially change for the better.')
2. Any organization not explicitly right-wing sooner or later becomes left wing. (Conquest gives as examples Amnesty International and the Church of England.)

3. The simplest way to explain the behaviour of any bureaucratic organization is to assume that it is controlled by a cabal of its enemies.

I will make some remarks about the first law, *Everyone is conservative about what he or she knows best*. I do so because we should have a spontaneous sympathy with moderately troubled, moderately conservative thinkers in whatever religious tradition they, or we, are. They usually see things more clearly than anyone else. We do not need to be reminded that it is only conservatives who can be radical because only conservatives have roots.

When the statement, *Dabru Emet*, was published by Jewish scholars in 2000 as a Jewish scholarly response to the theological recognition of Judaism which Christians have made recently, it provoked controversy in the Jewish community. Among the opponents of the statement was Jon Levenson, Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard.<sup>1</sup> I choose two statements from *Dabru Emet* that angered Levenson; the first is this:

Jews and Christians worship the same God. Before the rise of Christianity, Jews were the only worshippers of the God of Israel. But Christians also worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Creator of heaven and earth. While Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews, as Jewish theologians we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel.

Levenson's first difficulty centres on the identity of God himself. He criticises the view often taken by participants in Jewish-Christian dialogue who 'speak as if Jews and Christians agreed about God but disagreed about Jesus'. For Levenson, a disagreement about Jesus is necessarily a disagreement about God because for Christians, Christology is a necessary co-relative to Trinitarian monotheism, and so a Jew simply cannot be expected to say that this is 'the same God'. Jewish-Christian dialogue is too often conducted, Levenson says, by people who 'have forgotten that in a very real sense, orthodox Christians believe Jesus *is* God'.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, in the face of traditional Jewish reservations about Christianity – Maimonides thought it was an idolatry – *Dabru Emet* states that through Christianity God has revealed himself to the nations. But in Jewish tradition, says Levenson, 'there is no covenant between God and the Church' that can

<sup>1</sup> J. Levenson, 'How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue,' *Commentary* (December 2001), 31–37; 'Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Jon D. Levenson & Critics', *Commentary* (April 2002), 8–21. I commend to you his description that 'in the Torah Israel is a supernaturally graced natural family', a phrase expresses how Israel matters as a prototype people of significance to all human beings.

<sup>2</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.37

justify this.<sup>3</sup> The classic position is that there is no necessity to accord to Christianity a privileged role in God's dealings with Gentiles; all that is needed is an appreciation of the Noahide covenant with all living creatures (Genesis 9.8ff). Noah's role is Biblically attested as the way of God's dealings with all living creatures: why attribute an additional role to Jesus?

A second statement from *Dabru Emet* with which Levenson has difficulty is this:

The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture. Christians know and serve God through Jesus Christ and the Christian tradition. Jews know and serve God through Torah and the Jewish tradition.

In response to this, Levenson has two points: firstly, 'why should Jews – as Jews – affirm as a matter of belief that the Church will survive until the final redemption?'<sup>4</sup> Christians are not necessary participants in the Jewish vision of the end-time. If Californian retreat houses are any guide, we might well have become a bunch of tree-huggers by then. Secondly, the parallel *Dabru Emet* makes between how Christians know and serve God and how Jews know and serve God suggests that Jesus Christ is a vehicle of divine self-communication analogous to the Torah in Israel. Should Jews hold this? And if they do, they surely need to work out some kind of Christology, no matter how minimal (and there are certainly enough Arians and liberal trimmers who can guide them into these Christological shallows).

What is Levenson afraid of? He thinks that if you speak in these ways, you press Judaism to develop a theological account of Christianity and to see a role for Jesus Christ in God's purposes which it has always resisted. Further down the line, as soon as you say that Jesus matters for non-Jews, you cannot avoid the question of his possible significance for Jews too. And with these incremental concessions, made in an anodyne way in *Dabru Emet*, you change Judaism. So, at stake for Levenson are three things: firstly, 'the nature of a conceptually coherent religious pluralism' – I don't think, by the way, that Christianity has such a consistent or adequate account of this – secondly, his dislike of 'extra-traditional' approaches which pronounce each tradition equally valid and thereby eliminate or relativise their essential truth claims, and thirdly – this is implied, rather than stated by Levenson – a dislike of dialogical engagements which effect serious mutations in the character of each religion.

Later I will address the question of whether a positive acknowledgement of Judaism effects a distorting mutation in Christianity: my

<sup>3</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.34

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

own view is that it is a recovery, a *ressourcement* of the Church's identity at the deepest level, and if there are changes, they will be *approfondissements* and a re-centring of mission and identity.<sup>5</sup> A renewed connection to Israel, a re-centring *ad intra*, is a condition of effective mission *ad extra*. But let us stay with Levenson's questions and look at how an American Christian writer, Paul van Buren, characterises the three stages of the Christian-Jewish relationship.<sup>6</sup> His scheme involves four elements and three pairings. Let me explain.

The first pairing represents what we inherit from our history and signals a clear separation of the elements of Christian belief and the elements of Jewish life: so, on one side you have *Jesus and Church* and on the other *Israel and Torah*. As van Buren sees it, this pairing brings out an important truth: 'the two traditions really are different' because each tradition is grounded in a different foundational moment. It also suggests a ratio that evokes *Dabru Emet*: 'Torah is to Israel as Jesus is to the church, or Jesus does for the church what Torah does for Israel. That is, Torah and Jesus serve, for their respective communities, as the origin, the normative guide for living, and the assurance of divine care of, divine concern for, and divine presence with the community.'

Van Buren can say this because he is a Christian and the Christian narrative is by its nature all-encompassing, even totalising in Levinas' sense: it can tend to evacuate events of their particularity in order to compose a grander, more universal scheme. Rabbi David Hartman in Jerusalem told me, 'Don't make us Jews actors in your Christian story. We are actors in our own story'. The point is well made because we Christians see too easily the Jewish moment as a preliminary stage in the unfolding of the Christian moment. Rowan Williams' remark is apposite here, that Christianity and Judaism are not two different answers to the same question, but are simply two different questions, with correspondingly different answers. *Judaism is not embryonic Christianity, but is how a religious people conducts a universal mission on behalf of God*. I particularly appreciate the directness of Rabbi Norman Solomon's description of what Judaism is and what it is for:

One of the most peddled distortions of Judaism is that is some sort of 'ethnic' religion. As Jews themselves, sometimes even the learned among them, are principally responsible for this notion getting about, I

<sup>5</sup> 'Within the dynamic of the Council concerned throughout with the nature of its mission to Gentile modernity, *Nostra Aetate* requires of the Church that it re-centre itself in relation to the continuing vocation of Israel as a condition of undertaking its Christ-given mission *ad gentes*.' J. McDade, 'Catholicism and Judaism since Vatican II', *New Blackfriars* 88 (2007), 367–84; p.368

<sup>6</sup> Paul van Buren, 'Torah, Israel, Jesus, Church – Today' at: [www.jcrelations.net/artic11/vburen.htm](http://www.jcrelations.net/artic11/vburen.htm)

cannot follow my gut reaction of blaming it on anti-Semitism. But it is about as wrong-headed as can be. Judaism combines a world religion with a prototype people . . . . Judaism is a missionary (though not necessarily proselytising) religion, with deep concern for the world and a profound contribution to make to resolving its present problems . . . .<sup>7</sup>

Van Buren's second pairing, *Jesus and Torah* and *Church and Israel*, emerges in the present age (*nostra aetate*) when Christians and Jews begin to see that there are pathways between them that cannot be ignored. Spontaneously, Jewish and Christian scholars interpret Jesus in the context of Jewish diversity in the first century CE. The theme, for example, of Jesus as a Torah-observant Jew must be part of a modern Christology. It is rarely noted, by the way, that it is Paul who presents us with the clearest and possibly earliest rationale for the Incarnation: 'God sent his own Son . . . in order that the requirement of the Torah might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit' (Romans 8.3-4). In other words, the Son of God comes so that Torah can be fulfilled by those who follow him – a rationale for the Incarnation that forms no part of any classical Christian apologetic that I know. The reason we ignore this is that we no longer think that observance of the Torah matters. By contrast, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that Christ's 'religious life is that of a Jew obedient to the law of God' (531), a statement surely related to Aquinas' teaching that 'Christ conformed his conduct in all things to the precepts of the Law' (*Summa Theologiae*, 3a, q.40.a4); what Aquinas knew Christologically, modern scholarship affirms exegetically and historically.

In addition, Christians now realise that one cannot consider the Church without focusing on its tie to Israel, both as its historic root and as a feature of its continuing character. If the Church and Israel are 'linked together at the very level of identity' and that this is 'founded on the design of the Lord of the covenant,' as John Paul II put it, then Catholic ecclesiology cannot ignore this relationship. The Church has a living tie to the Jewish people and, says van Buren,

it can only see itself as a community of Gentiles, drawn from all the other nations of the world, who have been called by the God of Israel to serve God alongside of and not in place of Israel. Because the church's Lord is a Jew, one of Israel, the church cannot draw near to that Jew without drawing near to his people, and the church cannot be servant of that Jew without also serving his people . . . . And so we can conclude that for Christians, Jesus is the Jew who binds the peoples of the nations to his own people Israel.

Van Buren is right to say that 'Jesus is the Jew who binds the peoples of the nations to his own people Israel'. He should also have said, I

<sup>7</sup> Norman Solomon, *Judaism and World Religion* (Macmillan, 1991), p.8

think, that Jesus is the Jew who binds his own people Israel to the peoples of the nations, if we give due weight to Ephesians' declaration that he has made us, Jew and Gentile, 'both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility' between us (Ephesians 2.14). But the convocation and reconfiguration of Jew and Gentile by Christ is ignored by van Buren. It is not that he is wrong in what he says, but he is inadequately Christian in his treatment of these things, and I'm afraid this is all too common in Christian dialogue with Jews. While he is clearly right to reject the idea that the Church replaces the Jewish people, his image of it as a Gentile community standing 'alongside Israel' might strike you as ecclesially deficient. He sees the Church as essentially a community of *Gentiles*. But the Church is the flowering of what Christ intended: first of all, a convocation from the body of Israel (*ecclesia ex circumcissione*) and then, on an equal basis, a convocation from the nations of the earth (*ecclesia ex gentibus*). Hence the visual representation of the Church in the mosaics of the church of Santa Sabina in Rome, in which two dignified matrons represent the equal participation of Jews and Gentiles in constituting the community of final salvation.

Behind van Buren's words too, I suspect, is Paul's remarkable Christological description in Romans 15.8 that Christ comes as 'a servant of the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God'. If one holds that the mission of Christ is conducted first of all in Palestine and subsequently continues through his risen presence, then the relation of Christ to Israel cannot be consigned to the past, to that very different country there and then. We have still to explore the Christological and ecclesiological significance of Christ being a servant of the circumcision: for the most part it is irrelevant to our consideration of the person and work of Christ.

The Resurrection is the condition in which his priestly self-offering to God becomes effective in relation to all human beings, and so a continued service of the Jewish people is one of the features of the Risen Christ's ministry. God's work through him in relation to Israel is unfinished. If you hold this, then two things follow: firstly and strangely, this might be why the Jewish moment in the divine dispensation continues, *nostra aetate*, in this time of synagogue and church. Secondly, if there is a continuing mission of Christ to Israel, then one can never be content with an account which places his significance only in relation to the Gentile world. Too often Christians in the dialogue accept this unreservedly, but the entire New Testament witnesses that God sent his Son to Israel and this mission, like his mission to all of humanity, is unfinished. If the Jewish people, like the beloved disciple in the Gospel of John, remains until Christ comes, then Christ's words to Peter can also be words to the Church: 'What is that to you? Follow me' (John 21.22). I do not think that the church can be an agent in this mission; it is for God to deepen Israel's

grasp of the nature of the covenant and promises which God has made.

I turn to the questions asked by James Dunn because they seem to me to be the central questions, finely and correctly asked. Writing about Paul's Gentile mission as a fulfilment of the promise of Abrahamic blessing to the nations (Genesis 28.14), Dunn is clear that the Church does not replace the Jewish people. Dependent on God's action in Israel, the Church is an expression of the dynamic within Israel and can only be understood as, in some measure, part of Israel:

Can Christians understand themselves except as part of Israel: as enlightened by Israel, as Abraham's seed and heirs of Israel's covenant promises, not instead of Israel but as part of Israel? But the question confronting Jews is equally profound. Can Jews understand themselves as Israel without being open to the possibility that Gentile Christians are also participants in that same Israel, again not instead of Israel but as part of Israel?<sup>8</sup>

The issue for Dunn is not how many covenants there are: too much writing on Christian-Jewish relations gets bogged down in the question of how the Sinai covenant can be said to relate to the covenant on Calvary, all in the interest of preserving what seems to be an ethnic division of grace that is unjustified by Christian Scriptures or properly understood Christian theology. The sequential approach that underlies this suggests mistakenly that God does different things, first by dealing with Israel through the Sinai covenant and then sorting out everyone else through the covenant of Calvary; this needs to be countered by the more accurate principle that there are complex effects within the world that arise from the unitary self-gift of God: Sinai and Calvary are not distinct dispensations but integral features of the one God's self-communication to the world. This principle, by the way, seems to me to be the basis of what Levenson called a 'conceptually coherent religious pluralism' that might be worked out on the Christian side.

Dunn's first question invites Christians to see themselves as that which, arising in Israel for the sake of the nations and permanently dependent on Jewish teaching and the divine promises made to the Jewish people, never ceases to be part of Israel. The Church eventually becomes socially distinct from Israel. But I doubt that it can ever be religiously distinct from Israel. Whatever arises through Christ must be *part of Israel* because it belongs within the dynamic of God's dealings with Israel and because it quite simply cannot 'be' anything else. Christianity cannot but see itself as springing from Israel for

<sup>8</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, 'Paul: Apostate or Apostle of Israel?', *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89 (1998), 256–71; p.271.

the sake of the nations and from the nations for the sake of Israel. Dunn's second question invites Jews to consider that the boundaries of Israel have been extended to include, potentially, all human beings. Significantly, neither question envisages the replacement of one community by the other.

If I am asked what Christianity is, I would say that it is 'reconfigured Judaism', and that correspondingly the Church is 'reconfigured Israel' whose boundaries have been enlarged to include potentially all human beings. Its basis, accessible to all through faith, is a *halakah* of Torah-observance, conducted through Christian discipleship and a sacramental sharing in Christ's passion. This reconfigured Israel is grounded in Jesus' own vision of gathering Israel to be the restored Temple, the dwelling place of divine holiness, sanctified by his self-offering, there to be joined by the nations in worship of God (Isaiah 2.1-2).

From its inception as a movement within Israel, the church claims that God has so extended participation in Israel's prototypical filiation, consecration and chosenness that the promise that Abraham would be 'the father of a multitude of nations' (Genesis 17.5) has begun to be realised. (By being Abrahamic and Christic, the Church is Catholic.) It quickly develops an argument that membership of this reconfigured Israel is through a faith first found, archetypally, in Abraham, 'the father of us all', in whose faith we share (Romans 4.16). It would do us no harm in our reading of the Pentateuch to learn from how Jews read this text and thereby see the central figure of Genesis as Abraham and not Adam.

The Church flirts disastrously with the idea that this extended filiation effects a rejection of the children according to the flesh, but out of respect for God's consistency to his promises, draws back from this (Romans 9-11) and brings sons and daughters raised up from the stones of the earth (Luke 3.8) to join Israel, the beloved first-born son, to whom belong 'the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of Torah, the worship and the promises' (Romans 9.4). But a predominantly Gentile Church will always be tempted to turn against Israel in aggressive replacement: to adapt Conquest's second law cited earlier, we might say that a church that does not feel connected to Israel will eventually see itself as standing in the place of Israel.

The question facing the first believers in Christ, and by the Church in all subsequent generations, is how to estimate the status of the prototype, Israel, in the new universal context created by Christ and the spread of the Gospel to non-Jews. The first steps towards moving the Church towards universality without the traditional signs of Jewish particularity take place at Antioch where the decisive paradigm of ecclesial unity in which the distinctions between Jew and Gentile dissolve and both, equally and inclusively, constitute the reconfigured people of God. Paul's words to the Roman community are the fruit

of Antioch's lived experience: 'for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, and is generous to all who call on him' (Romans 10.12). The Adamic distinction of gender ('male and female'), the Abrahamic distinction of membership of Israel's covenant ('Jew or Greek'), and the hierarchical distinction of social status ('free or slave') (Galatians 3.28) are to count for nothing in this composition of this community which is, simply and sufficiently, 'in Christ'. (The subtext of Paul's insistent phrase, 'in Christ' is 'not in Torah-centred Israel'.)

Dunn's question to Christians explores what Pope John Paul II described as a relation 'at the very level of identity', namely that the relation of this reconfigured Israel to Torah-centred Israel extends into a conjoined, single mission on behalf of the truth of God. What Barth called disparagingly 'the Catholic "and"' comes into play here: Israel according to the flesh *and* the community of reconfigured Israel; two communities, focused upon different but inseparable moments in 'the design of the Lord of the covenant', communities which may not be assimilated one to the other, but neither can they be separated. Both Israel according to the flesh and reconfigured Israel re-enact as rival siblings the tension between elder and younger brothers that characterises the Patriarchal narratives in Genesis; related, competitive and rival communities claiming the promises and the status of God's beloved son, but also communities which might be designated as 'the Israel of God', Paul's enigmatic phrase in Galatians 6.16.

One of the things we lack is a way of designating the co-presence of Israel and Church within something larger than each of them, and so we seem to be unable to think of them together without subsuming one to the other. That is why we need a category in which to place them together in their distinctiveness, and I suggest that the term 'Israel of God' might fit the bill, designating the presence of 'ethnic Israel' and reconfigured Israel within the one obedient community called to witness to God. I am drawn to Michael Wyschogrod's view, which echoes Dunn's position, that Gentile Christians might understand themselves as,

the gathering of peoples around the people of Israel, the entry of adopted sons and daughters into the household of God. Through the Jew Jesus, when properly interpreted, the gentile enters into the covenant and becomes a member of the household, as long as he or she does not claim that his or her entrance replaces the original children.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> M. Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations* (Eerdmans, 2004), 21–22. In our liturgy, we really should stop using the Jerusalem Bible's replacement of 'Gentiles' by 'pagans'. Gentiles means 'those of the nations', and theologically, it means 'those who are covenanted through Noah' or simply 'those imperfectly covenanted'.

In the light of these points, let us return to van Buren's scheme, partly in order to look again at this question of boundaries between the traditions: the third pairing he proposes is *Jesus and Israel* and *Church and Torah*. For van Buren they are not yet part of the agenda because the time is not yet right for them, but he sees them as the logical development of dialogical engagement, confirming, one suspects, Levenson's worst fears.

It is not the Church's role to press the Christological question on to Jews. As Cardinal Ratzinger, Benedict XVI acknowledged that we should not expect Jews to recognise Jesus as Son of God, but it is not unreasonable to think that they might come to view him as a servant of God.<sup>10</sup> But we should pay particular attention to van Buren's suggestion that in the future the Church might re-engage with Torah. Torah, should be, he says,

the principal Scripture for the church. The connection between the Torah and the church is and should be fundamental, because Christians can never relate to the real, the living Jesus without the Torah . . . . Set the church adrift from Torah and you set the church adrift, not merely from its foundations in Israel, but adrift from its foundation in Jesus Christ. The future for the church, if it is to have a future as the church of the God and Father of Jesus Christ, lies in its discovering, precisely as Gentiles and not Israel, the priority of the Torah and so of its Old Testament in its liturgy and for life, and so of its learning to re-read its New Testament always in the light of the Old Testament. In fact, the New Testament is . . . the story of how the church became authorized to read as its own the Scriptures of Israel. It is the church's license to read the Torah, and only when the church puts the Torah in first place will it have the antidote to the poison of the anti-Judaism that has sickened so much of its history.<sup>11</sup>

Does this bring to the average Christian theologian the equivalent of a 'Levenson moment'? Is it a step too far, a step too far backwards, taking us to a form of Torah-centred religion rejected by Pauline and other early Christian communities? Perhaps so, but it is a very provocative suggestion, pointing us towards a re-examination of the way in which Christianity is weakened by a deficient sense of Torah, commandments and observances. Van Buren is calling for the Church, as essentially a Gentile community, to learn to read again the priority

<sup>10</sup> 'Even if Israel cannot join Christians in seeing Jesus as the *Son* of God, it is not altogether impossible for Israel to recognize him as the *servant* of God who brings the light of his God to the nations. The converse is also true: even if Christians wish that Israel might one day recognize Christ as the Son of God and that the fissure that still divides them might thereby be closed, they ought to acknowledge the decree of God, who has obviously entrusted Israel with a distinctive mission in "the time of the Gentiles":' J. Ratzinger, 'Interreligious Dialogue and Jewish-Christian Relations,' *Communio* 25 (1998), 29–41; p.37.

<sup>11</sup> Van Buren, *Op.cit.*

of Torah in order to connect properly to Christ its Lord, to the Jewish people and in order to rid itself of an anti-Judaism that is always just under the skin. Is this possible?

This point needs to be set in the context of a discussion of the weighting of different decisive ‘moments’ within the two traditions. Van Buren is asking if Christianity underplays the Sinaitic moment. Sinai is the moment of Torah and *mitzvoth*, commandments. Now it is clear that Christianity privileges the Messianic moment over the Sinaitic moment: how could it not? On the other hand, especially since the Rabbinic period, Judaism resolutely defers the Messianic moment and focuses on Sinai, judging that there is nothing in this moment of covenantal nomism that requires modification in the light of putative teachings about a suffering and risen Messiah. There are *caesurae* and lost paths between Sinai and Calvary that make travelling between them difficult and we ought readily to understand how difficult it is for Jews even to think of making that journey. Common to both traditions is the Abrahamic moment: Judaism is also cautious about extending this beyond the boundaries of the Jewish people in the way that St Paul proposes. Levenson, for example, is very critical of Rabbi Irving Greenberg’s suggestion that Christians and even Moslems be included in the category of ‘the people of Israel’:

Here [Greenberg’s] operative insight is a valid one: “our own religion must make room for the independent dignity of the other and the faith of the other.” But given the Talmudic dictum that “the righteous of the nations have a portion in the World-to-Come”, can we really say that the Jewish doctrine of election is necessarily (and not contingently) an assault on the dignity and faith of Gentiles. Must Jews, in other words, make Gentiles into Jews in order to respect them?<sup>12</sup>

Levenson recommends, by contrast, that both Judaism and Christianity affirm, within their own religious resources, ‘the spiritual integrity of the other tradition’, without eliminating the boundary between Jew and non-Jew.

Let me try to sketch the symbolic configuration of different ‘moments’ that Christianity creates from Biblical and Second Temple Judaism. Significantly, it holds together the Messianic moment and the universalism inherent in the Abrahamic moment – ‘in your offspring all the nations of the world shall be blessed’ (Genesis 22.18) – which it takes to be realised through Christ. It loves the rich prophetic moment particularly in relation to social justice and universal hope; it preserves and reworks sacramentally in relation to Christ the moment that creates the traditions of Zion, priestly service and Temple sacrifice. The practices and imagination of Christianity are flooded

<sup>12</sup> J.D. Levenson, ‘Chosen Peoples’, *Commonweal* (November 5, 2004). The exchange with Greenberg continues on January 28, 2005, accessed through *FindArticles*.

with categories drawn from the Second Temple; it maintains and develops patterns of priestly mediation, intercession, ritualised worship, blessings, sacred space and cultic ministry; its spiritual life is enriched by the sapiential moment of divine Wisdom made accessible in Christ, but, *but* – and this is where van Buren is right – it underplays the Sinaitic moment, the moment of divine covenant and of Jewish particularity and difference, the justice of *halakah*.

Christianity will say, classically for example in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, that Christ fulfils the whole Torah – the spiritual, juridical and ritual commandments – and that the Church by sacramental union and participation in him observes Torah, but this enters Christian consciousness only minimally and implicitly. Unlike Aquinas, for various cultural reasons, we are less comfortable with the place of law, observances and ritual in religion. I suspect one of the difficulties we have with law-based religions such as Judaism and Islam is that we favour introspective spiritualities and interiority as the core component of religion. We have learned to oppose too easily Gospel and Law rather than to see them as co-ordinated one with the other; we too readily set as divergent dispensations the freedom of the Spirit-filled children of God and the yoke of obedience to the Torah. We forget that the dynamic of the three Abrahamic religions is that they are religions of monotheistic Law capable of mutating into religions of mystical union, without ever leaving law behind. Have we forgotten that in one of the layers in the archaeological *tel* that is the New Testament, someone could say to the people, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so practise and observe whatever they tell you – but not what they do’ (Matthew 23.2)? The words are those of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. The Jewish-Christian core of early Christianity, what Jacob Jervell famously called ‘the mighty minority’ that lies behind the Matthean Gospel, was careful not to allow Sinai to fall into oblivion, but we have lost a feeling for such a point. That is why van Buren’s words can come across to us as threatening, but he does no more than re-state a feature of the earliest shape of Christian community and identity.

Our discussion has, I think, opened up perspectives on Christian identity and self-understanding which come from taking the relationship with Israel seriously. It has also, I hope, indicated that the emerging sense of connectedness between Jews and Christians is not without potentially disturbing consequences for both traditions. Does dialogue and engagement with another faith effect a damaging mutation within each religion? That cannot be answered in general terms, of course, because the nature of the engagements will differ. There is a particular quality about the Christian-Jewish relation in that both traditions spring directly from Biblical Judaism, emerge in a common matrix in the first-century CE and present themselves as rival and related accounts of the mission of Israel.

It will come down, I think, to whether dialogue and engagement deepen the fundamental features of the two faiths or whether they effect a distorting mutation that undermines the religion's central principles. Jon Levenson's concerns can be paralleled on the Christian side and they deserve deep respect: theological engagement should not take place at the fringes of a religious community, with only minimal reference to the normative and binding principles that articulate the core experience of that community. Too often Christian theologising in this area bypasses Nicaea and Chalcedon as though they never happened and as though they can be left aside while the reconstruction of a relation to Israel takes place. That is not good practice and can only serve to place the relation with Israel at the margins of the Church's life.

Does the developing engagement with Israel take Christians to the heart of where we should be or does it lead us away from the nexus of central beliefs, experience and worship? It certainly changes things: having inherited an account of Christianity which has a negative relation to Judaism, we are now faced with constructing a Christian identity positively related to Israel. That is surely right, and van Buren's proposals are a provocative way of raising this project. A serious religious and theological engagement with Israel is not a mutation within the Christian thing, but a deeper entry into it. To use a phrase which Aloys Grillmeier used about the Christology of Nicaea and Chalcedon, the engagement presents us with a *lectio difficilior*, a more difficult reading of the way in which God draws close to human beings within this trajectory of his dealings with Israel and Church. We should not be surprised that 'in our time' we are asked to read God's things in a more difficult way than before.

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