

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR PAUL VAN BUREN

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Because Professor van Buren's paper was unavailable until just before this meeting, I availed myself to a copy of his presentation before the American Academy of Religion, in Chicago, 1975, expecting his statement today to be an elaboration on Part Four of that paper read three years ago which included the following statement:

The fourth area which I would single out as crucial for demolition and reconstruction is the relationship between the New Testament and the Old Testament, or as I am convinced we must learn to call them, in conformity with the early Christian community, the apostolic writings and the Scriptures. My suggestions are simply these: that we must learn to put the Scriptures first, and to learn to read critically the apostolic writings in the light of Scriptures. Rather than using the apostolic writings as a critical screen through which we sift the Scriptures—and it can hardly be denied that this is the Christian tradition, only beginning to be brought into question in this century—we need to learn to return to the Scriptures as the norm and critical screen through which we read the apostolic writings.

In the paper presented at Chicago, Professor van Buren gave a much needed shift away from the traditional question: "How do we as Christians interpret the Old Testament?" But we did not hear anything in today's statement about that radical step on how we are to screen the apostolic writings of the New Testament through the Scriptures (Old Testament). For this reason I am inclined to prefer the proposals of Professor van Buren made in 1975, more than the suggestions presented in this paper of 1978.

The apostolic writings are only the first word to the Gentiles *about* God's plan for their salvation; the apostolic writings are not the first word *from* God about Gentiles or their salvation. While this fact is alluded to in the text of Professor van Buren's paper, there is a need that it be highlighted and clarified. Credit should go to the theologian who

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penned Psalms 82 and expressed therein the reality of monotheism, but in addition, in the closing prayer (82:8) recognized that the God of Israel would become the Judge of all nations since the whole earth was His inheritance. The theologian of Psalm 82 reversed the traditional understanding that Yahweh's relationship was established only with Israel, since the nations were allocated by Yahweh only the elements in the natural order for their worship (Deuteronomy 4:19; 32:8 LXX). Other statements about God's word to the Gentiles are found in the theology of the anonymous prophet responsible for the book of Jonah. Its internationalism, if not universalism,¹ recalls the affirmation of the theologian who gave the promise of hope in the covenant with Abraham: "... in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed (*nibreku*)."

If we are to interpret the apostolic writings in the context of history, it must be recognized that history did not begin with the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus. The history before the common era which includes the history and text of the Scripture (O.T.) cannot be ignored. It seems imperative to incorporate into the exegetical process ideas which Professor van Buren has expressed in his papers of 1975 and 1978, although he himself makes no cross references.

Professor van Buren stated that we are in no infallible position which gives us the prerogative to improve upon or to correct the apostolic writings. (In the context of this statement today we can appreciate the response Professor van Buren made yesterday to Professor Sanders' statement that "Paul was/is wrong!") Certainly we cannot claim infallibility, but we must admit that we stand in a good position to evaluate the apostolic writings since we have an authoritative statement within the apostolic writings as to that which is normative: "all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). If there is one point in which there is general agreement in New Testament scholarship, it is that "Scripture" in this text refers to the *Tanakh*, i.e. "Scriptures" in Professor van Buren's terminology. Torah and *Tanakh* can be used as a screen through which we interpret the apostolic writings, and if necessary to make corrections or offer reproof.

Although there is no merit in our blaming the apostolic writers for the ill effects of their inner-Jewish polemics, we must not repeat the process or the polemic. We must hold ourselves responsible for the history we produce. This responsibility calls for an exegetical model which does not preclude the use of a historical-critical methodology in the interpretation of both the Scriptures and the apostolic writings.

Professor van Buren correctly noted that there is a growing consensus that Jesus' ministry ranged within the framework of the Pharisaic party. He called attention to the Semitic and Judaic context and style of the apostolic writings. I strongly concur and would like to reinforce that argument. Although there is no decisive evidence, I, have a suspicion that John 14:6 may actually be an affirmation of a common objective of Jesus with the Pharisaic community, more than a statement about the exclusive uniqueness of the Christian position. "I am the way, the truth and the life . . ." seemingly reflects a statement originally made in Aramaic which has been translated into Greek, namely, *'ānā halakētā' ēmūnatā' wēhayyatā'*.² The statement would contain a play on the stem *halak* "walk" and could reflect the idea, "I am the *halakah*, the true (*halakah*) and the living (*halakah*); no one *halak*'s to the Father but by me (i.e. by my *halakah* of love)." The Pharisees were also concerned about a *halakah* of love.³ The difference was not in terms of the objective but in the source of authority. Jesus seems to have parted company with the Pharisees on the issue of oral tradition/law having more authority than his own spoken word.

Although Professor van Buren raised the issue about the inadequacy of translating *Ioudaioi* "the Jews," he offered no alternatives. A better translation, *per se*, may not be available; therefore I would suggest the alternative of paraphrase by such terms as "compatriot," "clergy" and "religious opponents," as the differing contexts necessitate. Then a literal translation misses the "deep meaning" of a term and at the same time fuels the fires of antisemitism, then a paraphrase must replace translation or transliteration.

This speaker was obviously disappointed with Professor van Buren's present disinterest in interpreting the apostolic writings in the light of Scripture (O.T.). Following his prolegomena, the major focus of the paper moved from the issue of "How do we interpret the apostolic writings?" to "How do we understand the Jew, vis-a-vis Jesus of Nazareth?" With reference to those answers reflected in the statements of the various church councils and synods, which Professor van Buren noted, the following question must be addressed (especially for those of us who come from an ecclesiastical tradition which seeks to proselytize): "In what way does the Jew need Jesus?" The solution concerning the Jew, vis-a-vis Jesus, offered by the Synod of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands in 1970 was that Jesus calls the Jew back to the covenant. This is the role of the prophet, and Jesus was not the first prophet to call the Israelites/Jews to repentance. Can we Christians honestly be satisfied if Jews recognize Jesus as a *nabi*, or will we continue to insist that they affirm with us that he was divine, God incarnate or the Logos? The intent of the Synod of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands was not made fully clear in this brief reference.

Such a statement calls for a more detailed discussion both in terms of intent and content.

The new attitude reflected in current dialogue needs to be stated with a bit more clarity so as to avoid a misunderstanding. In my initial reading of Professor van Buren's manuscript I read with surprise the statement that the new dialogue between Jews and Christians is not rooted in a new spirit of reconciliation, but is rooted essentially in the fact of the Holocaust and the reality of the modern state of Israel. This could be misunderstood, contrary to its intent, that this dialogue is only a Christian final solution since the Jew has not converted and has not been eliminated, i.e., we are forced to make room for the Jew in our theology. I would be more comfortable with a statement which precluded the possibility of such misunderstanding, and at the same time recognized the degree to which the dialogue is rooted in reconciliation and a spirit of theological growth from antisemitism to a consideration of a salvific element in the vicarious suffering of the Jewish community.

Several issues which I raise in this second half of my response to Professor van Buren's paper reflect my concern that we interpret the apostolic writings in the context of history and that history before Jesus be included, especially the text of *Tanakh*. Following up on Professor van Buren's ideas articulated in his paper in 1975, alluded to earlier, that we "screen" the apostolic writings through the Scriptures, several examples can be given to illustrate the possibilities particularly as they center on the issue of antisemitism and the seeds of the Holocaust.

In Peter's sermon in Acts 2:21 he quotes a passage from Joel 3: 30–32, "And it shall be that whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." It may well be that Peter was using the Septuagint text and consequently interpreted *kurios* "lord, master," as a reference to Jesus as Lord. But if the apostolic witness were interpreted in light of the *Tanak*, the prophet's own words would have precluded this possibility, for he stated, "all who call upon the name of Yahweh shall be delivered." Since current hermeneutical principles differ from those of Peter and other apostolic writers, prohibiting the interchange of Jesus for Yahweh via *kurios*, the question must be asked: "In the light of Torah/*Tanakh* why is salvation denied to those who call upon the name of Yahweh (or the surrogate *Adonai*) and why is salvation restricted to those who call upon the name of Jesus?" The Scriptures can serve as a corrective through the "screening process" and the Scriptures could instruct the Christian to affirm the integrity of the prophetic witness that all who call on Yahweh will be saved. Therefore the ambiguity of the apostolic tradition on the status of the Jews vis-a-vis Jesus stands to be clarified by the prophetic witness.

The other example, drawn from the biblical texts which have contributed to the antisemitism which resulted in the Holocaust is Matthew 27:25, “And all the people answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children.’” Perhaps these words, more than any other statement in the N. T, have contributed to the continuing antisemitism in Christian circles. But when these words of the people are screened through the Scriptures (O.T.) they can be seen as being meaningless. One can screen the mob’s statement through Deuteronomy 5:9b, “for I , Yahweh your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the father upon the children to the third and fourth generation o f those who hate me.” This would appear to give some credibility to the words. But a complete screening of words with the apostolic writings through the Scriptures would require input from Ezekiel 18: 2, “What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge’? As I live says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used in Israel.” If Ezekiel’s repudiation of the old proverb was valid and if the principle he articulated has any prophetic authority (i.e., “The soul that sins shall die” 18:20), the theology expressed by the mob, “his blood be on our children,” was obviously meaningless. Yet in a survey in available commentaries on Matthew, only one commentator alluded to the text in Ezekiel as a corrective to the Christian efforts to make those words of the crowd come true.⁴ Many of the older commentators justified continuing the curse on the Jew solely on the basis of the text from Deuteronomy 5. But the screening process fully implemented would validate Ezekiel’s statement which negated the principle of retribution assumed by those who called for Jesus’ death; and it would preclude any Christian validation of the negated principle.

This raises another issue if we are to interpret the apostolic writing in the context of history and have the Scriptures as a part of that history. Serious consideration must be given to the various theologies in the scriptures, and some value judgment must be made as to which theology is to be normative. For example, in Exodus 15:3 the statement is made, “Yahweh is *’îš milḥamâ* (a man of war); and within the Scriptures there is a pervasive “holy war” theology.⁵ Yet over against this theology of the divine warrior is the (minority) opinion reflecting a peace theology, articulated, for example by the writer of Psalm 46, “He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth, he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the chariot with fire!” (46:9). When the apostolic writings are “screened” through the Scriptures, which biblical theology is to be used for correction, reproof and instruction. This raises the larger issues of revelation and authority of the biblical texts.

It seems to me that as much as Christians need to move away from the category of two “testaments” they need equally to move toward the

recognition of two dimensions in the revelation within the Scriptures and the Apostolic Writings; i.e., there is a revelation about the nature of God and there is a revelation about the nature of man. The “holy war” theology which is a part of biblical tradition belongs to the category of the revelation about the nature of man, not the category about the revelation of the nature of God. Consequently when the Apostolic Writings are interpreted in the light of Scriptures, and when both the Scriptures and the Apostolic Writings are interpreted in the light of the Holocaust some difficult hermeneutical and theological decisions have to be made.

There are those who have successfully traced the thread of blood and violence culminating in the Holocaust back to the Antisemitism of the Church Fathers and the New Testament writers. But the seeds of religious violence which served as paradigm for political violence did not begin there. It seems to me that we can trace the antecedents of Holocaust violence back to earlier elements within our tradition, including our apocalyptic literature which envisioned one’s salvation secured by the suffering and death of others, as well as the more ancient “holy war” theology which envisioned God as *’iš milḥamā*, a man of war, and fostered, for example, the idea that Saul could be stripped of his royal power because he refused to obey an order for *herem*, the total destruction of enemy life.

The institutions of violence—“holy war, *herem* (whether historical or only a Deuteronomic or Deuteronomistic framework), as well as Holocaust in our generation—cannot be viewed as a revelation about God or His will but only as a revelation about the human predicament. Similarly, when we encounter words in the apostolic writings which feed the sin of antisemitism, we need not invest these words as part of God’s revelation about His will, but an integral part of the revelation about our propensity as human beings to build ourselves up by tearing someone else down.

Concluding this response I move to that concern of Professor van Buren that the apostolic writings must be interpreted in the light of history since the Christ event, a history which includes the Holocaust, and appeal to the question of the morning session: “God Active in History?” If there is any meaning to the Holocaust, and if there is any activity of God in events of the Holocaust, the only thing I find it possible to say is that God lived down the reputation of his being as *’iš milḥamā*, “a man of war.” At that point the Holocaust and the cross share a common point: God remained silent when death consumed His children and His Son. There was no killing intervention explicitly on their behalf. The appeal of the apostolic writers to God’s salvific work in the vicarious suffering of Jesus must be interpreted with full sensitivity to the vicarious suffering of the Jews, who, in the words of the prophet

concerning the suffering-servant Israel, have suffered because of us and for us:

Behold my servant Israel. Surely they (the Jews) have borne our griefs and carried our sorrows They were wounded for our transgressions; they were bruised for our iniquities. Upon them was chastisement made for us. By their stripes we healed
. . . .

God may yet work in history if the apostolic writings are interpreted in the light of the Scriptures, in the light of history, and in light of the Holocaust.

Notes

¹ Harry M. Orlinsky, “Nationalism-Universalism and Internationalism in Ancient Israel,” *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May*, H. T. Frank and W. L. Reed, editors. (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1970), 206–236.

² The Spanish exegete Johannes Maldonatus, S.J., (1534–1583) saw a Hebraism behind the Greek of this text: See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 2 (Anchor Bible 29A, Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 621.

³ Berakoth XI, 14b .

⁴ James Morison, *Matthew’s Memoirs of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 3rd edition. (London: Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1873).

⁵ See the recent studies of P. D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) and D.L. Christensen, *Transformation of the War Oracle in Old Testament Prophecy* (Harvard Dissertations in Religion No. 3, Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1975).