



Torah, Israel, Jesus, Church - Today

| van Buren, Paul M.

A rethinking of the relationships between these fundamental terms in light of the Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Torah, Israel, Jesus, Church - Today

by Paul M. van Buren

Outline:

The first half of the lecture defines the four terms:

Israel, the living Jewish people

Torah, the constitution of this people/nation, instruction in how to live its calling, Israel's kettubah

Jesus, the Jew whose story is told according to Israel's Scriptures who brought many Gentiles to the service of God

The Church as that community of Gentiles serving alongside Israel

Today - all four terms refer to living phenomena of our world today

The second half of the lecture pairs the terms in three different combinations.

First, the traditional pairing:

Torah with Israel

Jesus with the Church

This expresses our genuine differentness, but also draws attention to our mutual isolation and mistrust.

Second, a pairing that has become visible only over the past three decades and reflects a radical

reversal of traditional Christian teaching concerning the Jewish people:

[The inseparable connection of Jesus to Torah](#)

[The Church inseparably connected to the Jewish people \(Israel\)](#)

Finally, a speculation or hope about the future, expressed in a third possible pairing:

[The Church with Torah](#)

[Jesus with the Jewish people](#)

Were the church finally to come to an affirmation of the Torah (including the use of Israel's Scriptures as a check on the New Testament), then the Jewish people might acknowledge God's hand in using the Jew of Nazareth to call Gentiles to be Israel's allies.

I have been asked to address, in the present tense, and I invite you to think through with me in the present tense, a theme consisting of four terms that are familiar to us all, but misunderstood by many: Torah, Israel, Jesus, Church. Anyone who knows reasonably well both the Jewish and the Christian traditions, and that, as we sadly know, includes not a great many Jews and not a great many Christians, will know that each of these terms only really matters in the present tense. The Torah that matters is the lived and living Torah today, not what may or may not have been written or spoken by Moses in the wilderness of Sinai. The Israel that matters is living Israel, the Jewish people today, not a collection of tribes of the ancient Middle East. The Jesus that matters, whether you believe in him or not, is Jesus today, not some historical reconstruction of a first century Jew. The church that matters is the living congregation of Christians today, not Luke's idealized community in Jerusalem, or that wild congregation in ancient Corinth that the apostle Paul had to deal with. If we are to be serious about these terms, then of course we shall deal with them today, in the present tense. For after all, we meet here today as members of living communities, real flesh and blood Jews and Christians, not as historians of dead traditions. What I shall do to encourage your reflection is, first, define the most essential characteristics of each of our terms, taking them one by one, and then move on to consider the connections between them. Depending on how we pair them up, we shall find ourselves confronted with a less happy past. With a different pairing, however, we come upon the situation in which we find ourselves today. And with a third pairing, we are challenged to consider a future toward which we may be moving.

[Back to Outline](#)

I

Israel, the living Jewish people

Let us begin with Israel, for not only does Israel come first chronologically, but Israel is the historical context within which alone each of the other terms is understandable, and so, that on which all the other terms depend. Israel means and refers primarily to the people Israel, the Jewish people, the people who for millennia have recited the Shema, "Hear, O Israel," from sunrise to sunset. The name Israel, first given to Jacob, then transferred to the descendants of Jacob - "the children of Israel" - has, since well before the beginning of the Common Era, been the standard term for the Jewish people. Says who? Says Israel! Outsiders may call them "the Jews". They call themselves Israel. Read the Talmud or any other bit of rabbinic literature. Go to the synagogue or read any version of the Siddur, the Daily Prayer Book. Israel means this people.

But who is this people? Well, if you ask them this question, they, true to their long-standing custom, will undoubtedly answer you with another question. They may ask, by way of answer, "So, and what sort of a reply would count as an answer for you?" To save time, I shall jump to the answer that would count for a serious Christian: This is a people called to be apart or distinct from, and thus ever in the context of, all the other nations of the earth. That, in our conventional religious jargon, is called holiness. This is a people called to be different from, and so a sign for, all the others. The One who decided on this strange calling is the One whom Christians as well as Israel call God. Israel is the people who think they have heard this call and who have decided to live by it. That is the ground of their story, as it is told from the story of Abraham up to the story of today.

Christians should be aware of the fact that many Jews are not happy about, disbelieve, and try hard to forget or ignore the story of their calling which they have carried with them through a long and difficult history. Be that as it may. As long as those Jews continue to identify with their people, and continue to have children and raise them in some sense Jewishly, the story of their calling will be served. In them too, the people Israel lives.

[Back to Outline](#)

Torah, the constitution of this people, Israel's kettubah

But how do you live as Israel? How do you live as a people with such a calling? The answer is provided by our second term, Torah. Torah means instruction, instruction in how this people is to conduct itself. Torah is first of all the five books of Moses, received as the constitution for the government of this people. Torah is to Israel as a constitution is to a nation, so it regulates what is to be done and what is not to be done in the life of the nation. In that sense, it is a part of the truth, surely not the whole truth, to translate Torah as Law, as the authors of the New Testament did. Now, a workable constitution for a continuing nation needs constantly to be interpreted, in order to meet new situations not foreseen by the original document. And all that body of interpretation has itself the force of the original constitution. It too is constitutional, instruction for how such a people is to live and govern its life. And so in historical fact, there grew up in Israel a body of what was called the Oral Torah, as distinct from, but developing and applying, the Written Torah. In the course of time, it too came to be written down in the form of the Mishnah. Then, as that too was further interpreted and expanded to cover more cases or new situations, what we now know as Talmud was also compiled and written down. All that is Torah for this people. And not only that, but to this must be added all the opinions of later rabbis on further cases and new situations, right up to this day. All that is also Torah. Indeed, any wise and helpful advice that any Jew may give to another is also called a word of Torah.

Torah is certainly seen by Israel as God's word, God's quite special word to Israel, which is binding on all Israel, but which no one else in the world has to follow. It is burdensome at times, yet on the whole it is Israel's joy, for it marks out concretely, for every moment of life and in each situation, how to live the special love affair between God and Israel. It is Israel's Kettubah, its marriage contract with its God. Consequently, it is Israel's guide for how to live out its distinctive life in the midst and on behalf of all the nations of the earth.

[Back to Outline](#)

[Jesus](#), the Jew according to Israel's Scriptures,

who brought Gentiles to the service of God

Third, we come to the Hellenized name of one member of the people Israel, a first century, pre-Mishnahic Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. All that we know of him comes from those who wrote his story, several generations after the Roman occupation forces killed him. Those authors passed on to us the story as they had heard it, but what they passed on was a story told, as they put it themselves, "according to the Scriptures". That is to say, their story was molded to the story of Israel that the Scriptures present, and often word for word. So Jesus is born in the city of David, is taken down to Egypt in his youth, and spends 40 days in the wilderness, as Israel spent 40 years there, before coming out in the open. Many of the details of his life and especially of his death are given in words taken from the Scriptures. So the only Jesus that Christians or anyone else have ever known is one who comes wrapped in and inseparable from the Scriptures of his people.

This intimate relationship between the story of Jesus and the story of Israel surfaces anew when we consider why it was that the Jesus story survived. It survived because Jesus survived. It survived because Jesus continued, after his death, to have the same effect on some people that he had had upon his first Jewish disciples: as he had brought his disciples more compellingly into the presence of the God of their people, so he began to bring some Gentiles, for the first time, face to face, so to speak, with the God of Israel. Thus the biblical story of Israel, called out from and for the sake of all the nations of the world, began to be reenacted or re-presented in the story of Jesus, the Israelite who awakened Gentiles to know and praise the love with which God loved his people Israel. And just this living effect of Jesus, realized through the witness and lives of his followers, has continued and continues to this day.

[Back to Outline](#)

[The Church](#) as the community of Gentiles serving alongside Israel

Finally, the church. We Christians say in our creed that we believe in the church. Looking our fellow Christians in the eye, or worse, looking at ourselves in the mirror, we have to believe, it

being so hard to see, that these sorry Gentile creatures are really called to serve the God of Israel, right alongside the people Israel, really called by the God of Israel to be holy or different in their own Gentile way. For the calling of the church is not to become Jews, not to join Israel, but to join with Israel, to serve shoulder to shoulder alongside the people Israel, working with them and with God, as Gentiles, for the redemption of this unredeemed world.

The church is of course just as concrete and visible as are the Jewish people, but what makes the church to be the church is no more visible than that which makes the Jewish people to be the people of God. In both cases, it is God's call that makes the difference. But whereas Israel has been given the Torah as God's pattern of how to live its calling, the church has been given the Jew of Nazareth as its guide. It is called to conform itself to that Jew, and to do so as a community of Gentiles, living evidence that God's covenant with Israel has effects in the real world. If Israel is called to be, by its simple existence, God's light to the Gentiles, then the Gentile church is called to demonstrate, by its simple existence, that Israel's light has not gone out, that that light still shines. In this way the church demonstrates that, as the apostle Paul put it, Jesus is God's confirmation of all God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (I'll have a word to say to that patriarchal phrasing in a moment.)

[Back to Outline](#)

[All four terms refer to living phenomena today](#)

Israel is living Israel. The people Israel lives, including their State, to which they could have given no other name. The State of Israel is a good reminder that the people Israel lives, but most of Israel does not live there. Most of them live right here in North America. The State of Israel has been much in the news, but fascinating and worth visiting as it is, it is not the whole story. The Jewish people here in Canada and the US and elsewhere is where Israel is to be found. In these various lands as well as in their historic Land, they confront the world to this day with the story of which they are the inescapable bearers.

Israel lives in part because **Torah** lives. Jews are not of one mind about how to live lives shaped by the Torah, and they never were. But what matters more than any single interpretation of the Torah is the fact that it goes on being interpreted. The very argument about the Torah is evidence that the Torah remains a living issue for Israel. The argument about who is a Jew and how to be Jewish is an argument about how the Torah is to be interpreted. You don't have arguments like that over a dead letter. The arguments are alive because Torah is alive.

Jesus, as a careful reading of the Gospels shows, is consistently presented as having been, in his short life, a consistently Torah-true Jew, although perhaps one who interpreted the Torah somewhat more flexibly for his Jewish disciples than he did for himself. But after his death, as the living reality that enlivened his disciples after his death, and more specifically in working through them to call Gentile disciples to serve the God he called Father, his emphasis was not primarily on Torah. It was, as it seems to have been from the beginning, on the reign of God on earth, here and now, today, or in a tomorrow that was so near as to be effective today. The only Jesus whom the church has ever followed, and the one they follow today, is the one who calls his disciples today to work and pray for the reign of the God of Israel over the whole earth, here and now. The story of Jesus that matters to the church is and has to be an unfinished story, for the task that Jesus took up is far from finished and still needs to be done. So if Christians were more serious and careful about what they say, they would never claim that they have been saved: they would, with the apostle Paul, speak of salvation, as Jesus spoke of the reign of God, always in the future tense, a

future that makes so important what we do and how we behave today.

And so **the Church** too lives. Don't be fooled by sociological studies that say that the church is dead or dying. I give you concrete evidence to the contrary: dead communities, like dead organisms, don't change. If they change, that is a sign of life. In the past thirty years, the churches, Protestant and Catholic, European and North American, have begun a most remarkable reformation of their most basic thinking, teaching and behavior, and that at a point that is far more fundamental than the issues involved in the Reformation that they went through in the sixteenth century. The church has begun - it's only a beginning, but it has really begun - to redefine and live anew its relationship to the people over against whom it came to its own self-definition, the Jewish people. Indeed, it has begun a one hundred and eighty degree reversal of its understanding of those from whom they had drawn their whole vocabulary for understanding themselves and God. That reversal is what will occupy us for the rest of this talk, but the fact itself is evidence that the church is alive. Indeed, it is going through what must be counted the most important transformation in its whole history since the time, in the first century, when it and the Jewish people turned their backs on each other. If the church were dead, there couldn't be happening what is actually going on today.

[Back to Outline](#)

II

In order to understand our theme, we must move beyond looking at each of the terms one by one. That which the terms designate never existed one by one, but always in combinations. So let us consider them by pairing them up. As we shall see, it makes all the difference in the world just which terms we pair together.

Before I begin the second, and I think the more important half of my presentation, however, I cannot let pass unnoted, that both the Jewish and the Christian traditions speak of God's promises to the patriarchs, and that it has taken women scholars to open our eyes to see, for example in Genesis 18, that the greatest promise of all, the promise of a child and so of a future, was made just as much to Sarah as to Abraham. Both of our traditions share in having done scarcely better than their surrounding cultures in giving women an equal place and an equal voice with men. Speaking for the moment only of the Christian side of the matter, I think we should note, however, that whereas the church shared in and thus helped to preserve a widely based sexism that many of us today find unacceptable, our peculiarly Christian anti-Judaism is something we actually invented. We didn't teach the world to be patriarchal; we did teach all of western culture, and so influenced all of the modern world, to despise Jews and Judaism.

That being noted, I return to the matters of pairing the terms of our theme in several combinations.

[Back to Outline](#)

[Torah with Israel](#)

The most obvious, because most familiar, set of pairs is the connection of Israel with Torah and the church with Jesus. That's easy, because we've all been doing it for nineteen centuries. It's easy, but the history of the abysmal relationship between the church and the Jewish people during those nineteen centuries should alert us to the danger in such a pairing. If the Torah is Israel's affair, so that Israel is defined by the Torah, and if Jesus is the church's affair, so that the church is defined by Jesus, then why should either community have anything to do with the other? Christians could and did say, Let the Jews have their old Torah; we have the truth in Jesus. And Jews could and did say, Let the church have its crazy Jesus; we have the truth in God's Torah.

There is, however, an important truth that is brought out by this traditional pairing: the two traditions really are different, and a crucial part of that difference lies in the fact that each tradition is grounded in a different foundational moment. Israel, the Jewish people, looks to Sinai and the gift of Torah as its founding moment; the church looks to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as its founding moment. Moreover, and more important, this pairing can also suggest the functional parallel that Torah performs for Israel and Jesus for the church. We could put it in the form of a ratio: 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.

[Back to Outline](#)

[Jesus](#) with the Church

The evidence of history, however, suggests that that first pairing has demanded the terrible price of mutual remoteness, not to speak of enmity. Being the smaller and weaker of the two, in numbers and power, Israel has had to pay in the flesh for the resulting hostility. The church, for its part, had to pay in the spirit for cutting itself loose from its God-given relationship to Israel. Finally, the church shocked by the unintended consequences of its long, long tradition of teaching contempt for the Jewish people, carried out by a modern neo-Paganism, but largely unprotested by the church, has been trying, over the past three decades, to find its way out of and free from its traditional anti-Judaic stance. As it has wrestled with this issue, it has come to consider a rather different pairing of the terms of our theme than that of the past. What has been coming more and more to attention are the pairs Torah/Jesus, and Israel/the church. What many of us have been trying to work through and see in fresh terms is the inseparable and positive relationship between Jesus and Torah, on the one hand, and then and as a consequence, the inseparable and positive relationship between the church and the Jewish people, the people Israel.

[Back to Outline](#)

[The inseparable](#) connection of Jesus to Torah

Let me begin with Torah and Jesus. What has always been obviously a fact, but one little noticed by Christians, is that Jesus of Nazareth was the product of Torah. That is, he was a Jew, and this is beginning today to be taken as the starting point for what the Churches have to say about him. He was a Jew and a Torah-faithful Jew at that. The Gospel according to Matthew brings this out

particularly sharply with a saying attributed to Jesus, that anyone who relaxes the least of the commandments will be called least in the kingdom of God. But this tradition concerning Jesus must have been fairly general, for not a single Gospel writer, probably all Gentile, shows Jesus breaking a single Torah commandment. That Jesus was a Jew, however, goes further than that. The best current New Testament scholarship is coming to a solid consensus that Jesus understood himself to be a prophet of Jewish restoration. That the Land of Israel was under a brutal occupation by the Roman army is a fact more appreciated by contemporary scholarship than it was in the past, and the subversive character of the Nazarene's preaching of the imminent reign of God is evident when set in the context of that occupation. It has been suggested that for the puzzling saying attributed to Jesus, about giving to Caesar and to God what belonged to each, the only interpretation that takes that context of Roman occupation into account, is this: Let that which belongs to Caesar - namely his army - return to Caesar, in Rome, and let that which belongs to God, namely the Land, be restored to God and the people of God. Such an interpretation makes it perfectly understandable why the Roman authorities condemned and executed Jesus as an insurrectionist.

But if Jesus was in fact on the side of Torah and the freedom of his people, then there could never be a Law-free Gospel, as the Reformers of the sixteenth century thought. For as a faithful Jew, Jesus could only have seen Torah itself as Gospel, as good news. As the Rabbis were to teach, "When Torah came into the world, freedom came into the world." The service of God is perfect freedom, the churches have indeed taught, but they have failed to see that the Torah is nothing but a pattern for the free and joyful service of God. Absolute service to God was what Jesus taught - "This do and you shall live," - and that was and is precisely the message of Torah.

We have, however, not yet come to the crucial relationship between Jesus and Torah. The crucial relationship is established by the qualifier in our theme: Today. The Jesus available to us today, despite all the efforts that critical, historical scholarship has made, is the Jesus of the original apostolic witness, namely, Jesus according to the Scriptures. The Scriptures contain more than Torah, and we know that the order of the books in the Scriptures was different for the early Christians, as it remains for the church, from that of the developing rabbinic tradition and of the Jewish people today, but in both traditions, Torah comes first. So a Jesus who died and rose again according to the Scriptures, the Jesus already being preached when the apostle Paul joined the Jesus-movement, namely, at its very beginning, was and remains one of whom we have no information at all other than of a Jesus according to Torah. His life was presented as a recapitulation of that of his people of Torah. His teaching is formulated in the language of Torah. Apart from Torah, Jesus is not only incomprehensible; he is unknown. That is where we are today.

[Back to Outline](#)

[The Church](#) inseparably connected to the Jewish people

We turn, then, to the connection that we have come to see today between Israel and the church, a connection that follows from that between Jesus and Torah. In contemporary terms, the Jewish people and the Christian church are both linguistic communities, the Jewish people by virtue of a common language, Hebrew, and common texts, the Scriptures, the Talmud and the rabbinic tradition. The church is a linguistic community that lives, not by a common language, but by virtue of the possibility of translation; it lives from a common story and a common Scripture, translated into and told in almost every language on earth. More specifically, these are two communities of interpretation, two rather different traditions of interpretation, of the Scriptures.

It used to be said that Christianity was the daughter of and grew out of Judaism, but today we

realize that in the first century there were many forms of Judaism, many ways of being Jewish. The particular form of first century Judaism that was the mother of rabbinic Judaism, in turn the mother of every form of Judaism today, was the Pharisaic strain of first century Judaism. But that was precisely the same general strain, mixed with a bit of Jewish apocalyptic thinking, that was the mother of early Christianity. So it is more historically accurate to forget the old mother-daughter image and to think of the two as sibling traditions, both heirs to the Israel story of the Scriptures, but each interpreting that story in different ways.

Although it is true to say that the two communities both bear witness to the one God and the one revelation, they are nevertheless quite different. The Jewish people, Israel, is both a people and a nation. Anyone can join Israel and become a Jew, but Israel's continuity depends primarily on Jews having children and bringing them up as Jews. The sense of peoplehood is therefore considerably stronger among Jews than among Christians. And Jewishness is much more a matter of behavior than of belief. Think what you want and believe what you can; it's what you do that matters. Christians put more emphasis on what to think or believe. Yet all these differences are, in the last analysis, matters of emphasis. They grow out of our different interpretations of our common heritage of the Scriptures.

One central feature of our relationship, however, has to be underlined. The great difference between our relationship today and how it was in the past is that the churches have come, over the past thirty years, to recognize the Jewish people today as continuing Israel, still the people of God's calling, in continuity with ancient Israel. The churches, certainly on an official level and increasingly in practice, have abandoned their traditional view of Jews as those whose calling has been revoked and replaced by that of the church. In a word, the churches, as a matter of official policy, however many individual Christians haven't gotten the word, have repudiated their old displacement theology and come to recognize that the covenant between God and the Jewish people, the covenant of Sinai, however interpreted by Jews, is still a going affair.

The consequence of this reversal is that the church 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. This recognition of the Jewish people as the people of whom Jesus is one, is unavoidable once Christians really recognize Jesus as a Jew, for a Jew, including that one Jew, is first of all a member of the people whom God called as a 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. Through him, we Christians share with Jews the heritage of Israel and the calling of God to God's service for the sake of this dangerously threatened world. That is where we are today, and that is what is brought to light by pairing Jesus with Torah and the church with Israel.

[Back to Outline](#)

[The Church](#) with Torah

A third pairing is also possible. Logically possible, that is. Only time will tell if it is actually possible. Nevertheless, I want to explore with you some implications of another set of pairings that challenges us to face a future into which we have not yet, but may possibly, move. I want you to entertain the possibility of pairing Torah with the church, and Israel with Jesus. This goes further than either the church or the Jewish people have dared to move so far. I make no predictions

about whether or when it will happen. But it could!

a) Let us begin with the connection between church and Torah. At first brush, this seems impossible, for Torah is God's special gift to Israel. Torah is God's definition of precisely Israel's holiness, its separation from and distinctiveness over against all the other nations of the world. How can this possibly be related to the church, made up as it is of those called out from just those other nations?

As a matter of historical fact, of course, the Jewish movement that was to become the church relied on the Torah and the rest of Israel's Scriptures from its beginning, but as it became a predominantly Gentile affair, it started to justify its claim to Israel's Scriptures by claiming it was itself Israel, the true Israel, replacing the Jewish people in that role. That claim is no longer tenable for a church that has come to recognize that the Jewish people is Israel. The church today and in the future can therefore only accept that it is a predominantly Gentile community, called by God to live and work alongside of Israel.

This Gentile church, however, does believe itself to be made up of those called out from among the nations. The church is not the world, nor does it believe itself to be of the world. It too, along with Israel, is called to holiness, to be separated out and set apart for the service of God. The church shares in that love with which God made covenant with Israel. So the church can and should claim to take God's Torah seriously.

I am referring here to the full Torah, not just the so-called Torah for the Gentiles, the more limited commandments which the Rabbis believed God had provided for Noah and his descendants. The church's Bible begins with the full five books of Moses, the whole Torah. And the ultimate reason for that is that the full Torah is mediated to the church by Jesus, as the full Torah is mediated to the Jewish people by the Talmud. If we put this in Jewish terms, we could say that the story of Jesus is the church's Talmud that takes us to Torah. That is why the church can recite the Shema, for Jesus teaches the church to love the Lord our God with all its heart and strength, and to love the neighbor as oneself.

Torah could be, and I would propose that it should be the principle Scripture for the church, because there is where the church comes as close as it possibly can to the one who comes wrapped in it. 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. A Jesus apart from Torah is not the real Jesus, not the Jew of Nazareth, not the living Jesus who died and rose for us according to the Scripture, but a figment of pious imagination. 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 only, but then really, 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.

[Back to Outline](#)

[Jesus with the Jewish people](#)

Let us then turn to the other connection for the future: Israel and Jesus. In one sense, the connection is inescapable, if hardly a happy one: no Jew other than Moses, not even the Rambam, the great Maimonides, has had a deeper impact on the history of the Jewish people than Jesus, for his church has been the most consistent and enduring enemy they have had to face. I would like, however, to suggest the possibility of a more positive connection, namely, that of the Jew Jesus in and among his own Jewish people.

This possibility calls for an emphasis, not on the divinity of Jesus nor on the humanity of Jesus, but on the sociology of Jesus: a Jew among Jews. For to be a Jew is to be first of all one of, and in solidarity with, the Jewish people. And that means, Jesus for his own people. But is that even a possible thought for Jews? Is it not true that many Jews can't abide even the thought of Jesus, much less the idea that he is one of them? Yes, that is true, but I would ask Jews to think this matter through with care, for I believe the truth of the matter is that what they really can't abide is not Jesus, but us Christians. What have Jews against a poor Jewish boy who, along with a lot of other Jews, got killed by the Romans? So he's the Jew who brought a lot of Pagans to bow down to Israel's God. So is there anything wrong with that? No, Jesus isn't the problem; we are! The Jewish No to Jesus Christ is fundamentally a No to the church and its faith in Jesus. And Jews have had to say No to the church precisely in order to continue to say Yes to God and to the covenant that they have made with God. Faithfulness to God has required them to say No to a church that has tried for centuries to force Jesus down their throats and to deny their covenant with their God. Thank God, in every sense, that they have done so and thus continued to be Israel!

But now, suppose, just suppose, that the church were one day truly to say, as it is only just beginning to say, Yes to Torah, and to thank God that the Jewish people has remained faithful to God by not becoming Christians. Were that day ever to come, in which Jews could see Christians for the first time as friends and supporters, rather than as the missionary enemy they have been for so many centuries, Jews might then feel free to reconsider Jesus as indeed the Jew he was and as one of their own.

Now, of course, Jews will never see him as Christians do, for he can never be for them the one whom the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob used to introduce them to Godself, but they might find he was at least a fellow Jew, the consequences of w life had finally produced, after so many centuries to the contrary, some friends and allies of the Jewish people. So it would finally depend on the church for Jews to come to see the connection of Jesus with Israel. That means, of course, that the connection of Jesus with Israel is a far greater challenge for the church than it is for the Jewish people, for it means that Christians can never serve this one Jew without serving his fellow Jews, for solidarity with him requires solidarity with his people. Only a very few have come to this so far, but I hope that it may be a possibility for the church of tomorrow.

Paul M. van Buren. With kind permission of the author.