

Jewish-Christian Dialogue: *Dabru Emet* and Beyond

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This paper briefly investigates the interreligious history that led to the publication of *Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*, and considers the statement's immediate as well as eventual impact. However as this topic has also been treated elsewhere,¹ I shall weight my paper towards Christian and Jewish responses to this statement and subsequent developments relevant to it, particularly within Orthodox Judaism.


Background


Since the first century C.E., and particularly since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., Judaism and Christianity have each struggled to be true to their shared scriptural roots while trying to decide what it means to be the people of God in a changing world. Whether or not they wanted to, each had to make this journey in conversation with the other. As Schäfer puts it, they are “two sister religions ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity,’ emerging in the first centuries C.E., interacting with and responding to each other, and gradually becoming ever more differentiated in the course of time.”² Early on, they were forced into a competition for legitimacy and status in the dominant Roman culture, a competition which has

¹ Joanna's paper.

² Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Christianity and Judaism Shaped Each Other*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 141

never completely ceased. The Gospel of Matthew's often negative portrayal of "the Jews," and apparent condemnation of Jews in perpetuity over their guilt in the crucifixion of Jesus (Matthew 27:25), is claimed to be evidence of "tensions that emerged fifty years after Jesus' death," and an effort to discount "rival claims being advanced by the leadership of emergent Rabbinic Judaism."³ But what began as a political/religious rivalry—expedient responses to the circumstances of the time—grew into a tragic, enduring gulf between these two peoples of faith. 

Although the 20th Century's *Shoah*⁴ manifests the ultimate depth of this tragic divide, it was the 16th Century that produced Protestant and Catholic theologians who were pivotal persuaders for its anti-Semitic origins. Their influence groomed Christians to eventually acquiesce in its horrors.  Martin Luther is to be indicted for his later, virulently anti-Semitic writings, particularly his advocacy that Jews should be completely removed from Christian territory and their Synagogues burned.⁵ Pope Paul IV is likewise to be censured for his papal bull, *cum nimis absurdum* (1555),⁶ that required Jews in the Church's domains to be restricted to ghettos, divested of their property, and to wear special badges for identification. Although neither's writings appear to have been used directly by Nazis to develop policies, both men's recommendations, nevertheless, found enthusiastic adoption in 20th Century Nazi practice. Buttressed by this history, the separation and mistrust between the two

³ Michael D. Coogan, Ed. "The Gospel According to Matthew," *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1747. 

⁴ Also known as the Holocaust.

⁵ Martin Luther, "On the Jews and their Lies (1543)," in *Luther's Works*, Martin H. Bertram, translator (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

⁶ Paul IV, *cum nimis absurdum* (1555). Accessed November 15, 2017 from Dialogika: <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/primary-texts-from-the-history-of-the-relationship/274-paul-iv>

faiths has remained one of intractable tension and heartrending grief, despite efforts on both sides to build bridges.


An international group of Christians and Jews met in Seelisberg, Switzerland in 1947 to contemplate anti-Semitism after the horrors of World War II, and to discuss ways to move forward together. The ten-point statement this conference produced was one of the first widely circulated, modern documents advocating Jewish-Christian dialogue, although the recommendations produced little response.⁷ Then in 1965, the Roman Catholic Church published *Nostra Aetate*, a declaration of the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions. This widely acclaimed statement acknowledges an independent validity to the Jewish faith, recommends “mutual understanding and respect,” and instructs that “the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God.”⁸ *Nostra Aetate* represented a major milestone in Catholic interreligious thought. Various statements from Protestant Christian denominations and interdenominational organizations followed exhibiting a similarly radical rethinking of the ancient rivalry.

The first Jewish response to this new spirit of dialogue was less positive than anticipated, and came in a form not expected by the Christian communities. A highly influential Orthodox Rabbi, Joseph Soloveitchik, who had been following the work of the Roman Catholic council that produced *Nostra Aetate*, preempted their arguments in his journal article “Confrontation,”⁹ which was published a few


⁷ Jonathan Frankel, Ezra Mendelsohn, eds., *The Protestant-Jewish Conundrum: Studies in Contemporary Jewry, Volume 24* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55.

⁸ Paul V. *Nostra Aetate* (1965). Vatican Archives (retrieved November 15, 2017): http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

⁹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *Tradition* 6(2) (1964), 5-29.

months before *Nostra Aetate*. Soloveitchik's arguments, still largely affirmed in the Orthodox world, were thought by many to be "an unambiguous rejection of theological dialogue, while others claim that Soloveitchik, rather, intended to warn against a contest over the correctness of Jewish and Christian doctrine."¹⁰ In any case, although warmly applauding the move away from enmity with the Jews, he did not look favorably on the rest of the Roman Catholic overture towards Christian-Jewish dialogue. A more collective, more positive Jewish overture was slow in coming for many reasons.  It was not until September 2000 that a document representing diverse Jewish voices and advocating dialogue finally did emerge to public acclaim: *Dabru Emet* (Speak Truth), published in the *New York Times*.¹¹

About *Dabru Emet*

Dabru Emet is a brief document, written to accommodate multiple Jewish perspectives about Christians and Christianity. It offers eight statements about how Jews and Christians might relate to one another, and was accompanied by a more detailed, explanatory book, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*.¹² Its themes are a common belief in the same God and reverence for  the same scripture, sharing of common morals, ability of each to respect the integrity and validity of the other's faith as well as own that there are important differences, and the desire to work together for justice and peace. It also asserts that Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon.

¹⁰ George R. Wilkes, "On 'Confrontation,' by Joseph Soloveitchik," in *Jewish/Non-Jewish Relations: Between Exclusion and Embrace. An Online Teaching Resource*. Accessed December 3, 2017 at <https://jnir.div.ed.ac.uk/primary-sources/contemporary/on-confrontation-by-joseph-soloveitchik/>

¹¹ The full text can be found here (Accessed November 15, 2017): http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru_Emet_A_Jewish_Statement_on_Christians_and_Christianity.2395.0.html

¹² Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael A. Signer, eds., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000).

Writing the document was undertaken by a “Jewish Scholars Group on Christianity” that formed with the intent to “move ahead into a reflective and serious re-evaluation of an approach to Christianity.”¹³ They saw their work as a reciprocal effort, mirroring work done by a “Christian Scholars Group,” formed in 1969, to study and improve the understanding between Judaism and Christianity from their Christian perspectives. Although primarily undertaken in collegiality with these academic colleagues, the timing of publication was influenced by a conservative swing in the Roman Catholic leadership, largely led by then Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI). Ratzinger’s *Council for the Doctrine of the Faith* was to publish, in August 2000, the document *Dominus Iesus*,¹⁴ which strongly reasserts the Church’s position that Jesus Christ, through his True Church, is the only possible means of salvation. It states, “If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation.” *Dabru Emet* attempts to reclaim interfaith progress that had been made, and was possibly now being lost, after *Nostra Aetate*.

The members of the Scholars Group were mostly North American and represented the small minority of Jewish people who have studied Christianity academically, and also those few who had already engaged with Christians in interfaith dialogue. While not in any way empowered to speak for all, or even one

¹³ Michael A. Singer, “Some Reflections on Dabru Emet,” A lecture delivered by Rabbi Michael A. Singer (University of Notre Dame) at the Institut Kirche und Judentum, Berlin, 26 July 2001. Website of the International Council of Christians and Jews: Jewish-Christian Relations: Accessed November 20, 2017 at: <http://www.icrelations.net/Home.112.0.html?L=3>

¹⁴ Joseph Card. Ratzinger, Pref. *Dominus Iesus*, Vatican Archives online. Retrieved December 7, 2017 from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html

denomination, of the Jewish people, they sought to gain some authority by soliciting signatures from well-respected rabbis across all Jewish perspectives. They succeed in generating a document congruent with enough Jewish opinion that it was signed, without edits, by 170 of the approximately 300 prominent rabbis it was first sent to for consideration, and eventually by well over 200 rabbis from across the globe: they were “some of the most important leaders of American Jewry and included Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist Jews.”¹⁵

Jewish responses to *Dabru Emet* were swift and ran the gambit from highly approving to sharply critical. It also produced responses from Christian groups in the form of new statements and new outreach efforts. The ongoing discussion eventually led to the reconsideration of Jewish-Christian engagement by several Orthodox Jewish leaders who had been initially very skeptical about any such attempts. Two recent (2015 and 2016) statements attempt to define acceptable parameters for Jewish-Christian dialogue from the Orthodox point of view.

The Christian response

The Christian response to *Dabru Emet* appears to have been almost uniformly positive. Statements of acclaim were quickly issued by Catholics, Lutherans, American Baptists, the National Council of Churches and other denominations and Christian organizations, as well as by numerous individual religious leaders and scholars. Although some expressed surprise, and perhaps a bit of offense, over learning that Jews had often blamed Christians—explicitly—for the Shoah, and that

¹⁵ Singer, *Some Reflections*


many Jews believe Christians to be idolaters because of their belief in a “triune God,”¹⁶ the overall Christian response was decidedly enthusiastic. “There was an enthusiastic echo from high Church authorities. Clearly, after their numerous declarations, the churches had been waiting for a Jewish response for quite a while.”¹⁷ They saw *Dabru Emet* not only as an historic document, but as the beginning of a new phase in Jewish-Christian dialogue.”¹⁷

It is interesting to note the range of attributions given to the emergence of *Dabru Emet*. Some seem to have felt that a Jewish overture towards Christians was expected, and possibly even long overdue: “We see in this statement a confirmation of our own work of these past years. *Dabru Emet* is for us an encouragement and an incentive to continue this work.”¹⁸ Most were careful to avoid claiming any credit for “first steps,” especially given that Jews and Christians had been continuously working together toward mutual understanding since before the 1947 Seelisberg conference. On the other extreme, some Christians saw the initiative as entirely on the Jewish side: “That such an initiative could be taken by Jewish scholars is on the one hand an embarrassment to those Christian interpreters who have failed to take some such correlative initiative toward Jews. On the other hand, however, it is perhaps inescapable that such an initiative could only have come from Jews,

¹⁶ Victoria Barnett, “Provocative Reconciliation: Reflections on the New Jewish Statement on Christianity,” *Christian Century* ((September 27 - October 4, 2000). Archives of the International Council of Christians and Jews: Jewish-Christian Relations: Accessed November 20, 2017 at: <http://www.jcrelations.net/Home.112.0.html?L=3>

¹⁷ Hanspeter Heinz, *Dabru Emet: A German Perspective* (01.03.2003) Archives of the International Council of Christians and Jews: Jewish-Christian Relations: Accessed November 20, 2017 at: <http://www.jcrelations.net/Home.112.0.html?L=3>

¹⁸ European Lutheran Commission, *European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People* (01.06.2003). Archives of the International Council of Christians and Jews: Jewish-Christian Relations: Accessed November 20, 2017 at: <http://www.jcrelations.net/Home.112.0.html?L=3>

certainly not from Christians who have too much to answer for from a history of abuse and domination.”¹⁹  But although a positive Jewish overture had been eagerly awaited, very little activity ensued.

“None of the associations of rabbis and synagogues in the various denominations of American Judaism and none of the big socio-politically involved organizations like the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League came out with a statement. The co-signatories as well hardly took any initiative in bringing about discussion of *Dabru Emet* in their respective areas or in developing an educational program on it.”²⁰

The Jewish response

Few Jews were ready to engage more deeply in interfaith dialogue. Some saw the document as simply continuing work that had been ongoing for decades: “Some of us were very much surprised by how strong the positive reaction was. Though I myself was a signatory to *Dabru Emet* (one of the few non-Americans), I did not consider the text to be unusually far-reaching.”²¹ Some discovered a fundamental difference in “how and on what basis Jewish–Christian interactions of various kinds are weighed up and ‘explained,’ permitted or rejected” by thinkers who start from a Jewish point of view, however they understand this. In Christianity this process would be termed theological, but in Judaism it has more of a jurisprudential flavour.”²² Even deep theological engagement between the religions would, to many a Jewish mind, be a call to deeper study rather than a call to dialogue; Judaism


¹⁹ Walter Bruggerman, “A Christian Counterpoint,” *Tikkun* 16(3), (May/June 2001), 73.

²⁰ Heinz, A German Perspective.

²¹ David Rosen, “*Dabru Emet*: Its Significance for the Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” Delivered at the 20th anniversary celebration of the Dutch Council of Christians and Jews (OJEC) at Tilburg, The Netherlands, November 6, 2001. Accessed November 20, 2017 at: <http://www.dialog.org/dialog/dabru-emet-david-rosen.htm>

²² Fred Morgan, “Jewish Perspectives on Jewish–Christian Dialogue Over Five Decades,” *European Judaism* Vol. 48, No. 2 (Autumn 2015), 4.

considers study to be the preeminent sacred calling and duty. And as for interfaith engagement in serving the world for justice and peace, it was already ongoing and needed no further justification.

Jewish theologians did dialogue with the *document*, however. It provided an occasion to reassess what interfaith dialogue means and could produce. The statement prompted influential Harvard University Professor Jon D. Levenson, possibly its most vocal Orthodox opponent, to affirm that dialogue “seeks good relations and requires each community to confront its misunderstandings of the other and the often-grievous results that these have had. At the same time, however, it also insists on **the importance of the theological core of each tradition** and requires both dialogue partners to **reckon with the full import of the other’s theology**, even when it not only contradicts but also critiques one’s own.”²³ Others found in it unique or surprising insights: “The fact that they used the name “Jesus Christ” was illuminating. I quickly understood that in such a text the use of the term is most appropriate: it is a corollary to the assumption that we should try to see the partner of dialogue as s/he sees her/himself.”²⁴ One noted that the writers “had the courage to reject the assumption that dialogue results in increased assimilation and intermarriage,” and “it takes a high degree of maturity to let opposites co-exist without pretending that they can be made compatible.”²⁵ 

²³ Jon D. Levenson, “The Agenda of Dabru Emet,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* Vol. 7 (2004), 2.

²⁴ Stanisław Krajewski, *Dabru Emet in Poland: A Personal Account* (01/06/2003) Archives of the International Council of Christians and Jews: Jewish-Christian Relations: Accessed November 20, 2017 at: <http://www.jcrelations.net/Home.112.0.html?L=3>

²⁵ Edward Kessler, “Understanding Christianity Today—Jewish Perspectives,” *Commentary* (April 2002), 484.

However, the most vocal and widely publicized Jewish responses to *Dabru Emet* were strikingly negative. At least since Soloveitchik, dialogue with Christians had been seen as proselytism, dismissed as a threat to the integrity of difference in both religions, or feared as occasion for theological compromises that would lead toward syncretism. One particular concern was the statement that Jews and Christians worship the same God: “it is essential to add that worship of Jesus of Nazareth as a manifestation or component of that God constitutes what Jewish law and theology call *avodah zarah*, or foreign worship—at least if done by a Jew. Many Jews died to underscore this point.”²⁶ Interpreting “Christian witness” as intention to proselytize, some believed that: “For Jews, the dynamic of interfaith dialogue has produced pressure from within or from without to see Jesus as a prophet, or even as a Messiah for non-Jews; to see the incarnation as a theologically acceptable.”²⁷ Some felt that the document “lets Christianity off the hook too easily, too early”²⁸ for atrocities of the past. In final opposition to the statement Levenson concluded, “The real agenda of *Dabru Emet* is thus not one of dialogue at all. It is one of negotiation. The Jews are making Christians an offer: if you change your religion so as to make it look more like Judaism, we will, without reservation, affirm it alongside Judaism as our fraternal twin.”²⁹

²⁶ David Berger, “Dabru Emet: Some reservations about a Jewish statement on Christians and Christianity,” Delivered to the *Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations*, Baltimore, October 28, 2002. Archives of the International Council of Christians and Jews: Jewish-Christian Relations: Accessed November 21, 2017 at: <http://www.jcrelations.net/Home.112.0.html?L=3>

²⁷ *Ibid.*


²⁸ Rosen, *Dabru Emet: Its Significance*.

²⁹ Levenson, *The Agenda of Dabru Emet*, 26.

Jewish-Christian Dialogue today

Although *Dabru Emet* may not have changed the world, it was seen by both Christians and Jews as a positive step towards interfaith dialogue and engagement. Yet, tensions remained. Marking fifteen of reflection of *Dabru Emet*, two groups of Orthodox Rabbis published their own statements on Jewish-Christian dialogue—reflecting two different points on the spectrum of willingness to engage—and outlining lingering concerns. The International group of Orthodox Rabbis published *To do the will of our Father in Heaven* in December 2015,³⁰ and The Conference of European Rabbis together with The Rabbinical Council of America published *Between Jerusalem and Rome* in March 2016, specifically timed for the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*.³¹ Both documents acknowledge and respond to “an era of bridge-building and tolerance [that] took hold in many Christian denominations.”³² Both acknowledge that Jews and Christians have a “covenantal mission to perfect the world,” and that “neither of us can achieve G-d’s mission in this world alone.”³³ *To do the will of our Father in Heaven* goes significantly further in stating that “we Jews and Christians have more in common than what divides us,” although asserting that this “in no way minimizes the ongoing differences between the two communities and two religions.” Although similarly affirming that we have “common beliefs in the Divine origin of the Torah and in an ultimate redemption,”

³⁰ International Group of Orthodox Rabbis, *To do the will of our Father in Heaven: Toward a partnership between Jews and Christians* (Dec 3, 2016), Accessed November 21, 2017 at <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/1359-orthodox-2015dec4>

³¹ Conference of European Rabbis and The Rabbinical Council of America, *Between Jerusalem and Rome* (01/02/2017), Accessed November 21, 2017 from Archives of the International Council of Christians and Jews: Jewish-Christian Relations: <http://www.jcrelations.net/Home.112.0.html?L=3> 

³² *Ibid.*

³³ International Group of Orthodox Rabbis, *To do the will.*

Between Jerusalem and Rome also calls for “all Christian denominations ... [to] excise anti-Semitism from their liturgy and doctrines, to end the active mission to Jews, and to work towards a better world hand-in-hand with us, the Jewish people.” The documents emphasize healing the world; promoting moral values; and opposing the rising tide of secularism, on one hand, and religious extremism on the other. Mutual understanding is a theme in both, although *Between Jerusalem and Rome* also asserts that “religious experience is a private one which can often only be truly understood within the framework of its own faith community.”

Yet even with these cautiously positive statements, there remain detractors. One of the signatories of *To do the will of our Father in Heaven* acknowledged that “most Orthodox rabbis will not sign on to the statement because they reject the idea that it is the will of God to reach out to gentiles through Christianity.”³⁴ And, assuming that when Christians “bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ” they explicitly intend proselytization, one dialogue critic concluded that “clearly that no respite is in sight for Jews who will remain targets of evangelization by those who believe their own Christianity cannot be authentic unless they harangue others.”³⁵



Conclusion


The road to Jewish-Christian interfaith dialogue has been long and bumpy. I have only briefly acknowledged the many positive developments that have occurred in recent decades. This is not meant to downplay the importance of this ongoing


³⁴ Lauren Markoe, “Orthodox Rabbis: ‘Christianity is neither accident nor error,’” *Sojourners* (12-09-2015), Accessed November 21, 2017 at <https://sojo.net/print/217908>


³⁵ Charles David Isbell, “Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity, ‘To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians’” (April 2016), *BibleInterp.Com*: Accessed November 21, 2017 at <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2016/04/isb408004.shtml>

dialogue, which has been vibrant and broad in scope and effect. *Dabru Emet* is a document that remains useful in focusing dialogue, providing eight specific points that continue to be important subjects for contemplation from both perspectives. I have highlighted the challenges, brought primarily by Orthodox Jewish theologians, because I believe **Christians can learn much from their arguments**. In addition to ongoing dialogue in the model of *Dabru Emet*, I am hopeful that new approaches can be developed that benefit from understanding the misgivings that remain extant in other parts of the Jewish community.

Interfaith dialogue cannot succeed if Christian enter into it **glibly** and f-righteously. We must bring into it our reflective repentance for bringing untold misery on our Jewish neighbors across two millennia of shared history. We need to summon the will to look seriously at Christian doctrines that may need to be revised and/or repudiated. We also must realize that the status many of us aspire to, that of “righteous Gentile” in this sad history, is one that a Jew can generously confer on a Christian, but not one that Christians may claim for their own. 

Christians should also not assume a common understanding of what we mean by dialogue or inter-faith understanding.  When we speak of finding “common ground” in dialogue, we may think this is mutual understanding and shared respect. Our dialogue partner may believe we intend to minimize difference, or even compromise doctrines, to create some sort of syncretized “shared faith.” We should acknowledge that this actually has been an agenda of some who promote “dialogue,” and ask ourselves if we are finally ready to accept, and work together within, irreconcilable difference. A Christian may have feeding the poor, caring for the sick, and protecting

the vulnerable in mind when talking about “Christian mission,” while a Jew may hear “preaching salvation in Jesus Christ” to all peoples.  To a Christian, their “witness” may mean always being “prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15), while a Jew may think “witness” is always an intent to convert. None of the above understandings is completely in error—dialogue, **Christian mission and Christian witness can be understood in multiple ways**—but we will simply talk past each other if we do not clearly communicate our working definitions and our intent.

Finally, we must accept that some Jews will remain, for the foreseeable future, unwilling to engage in theological, interfaith dialogue. Some firmly stand with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who said “the confrontation should occur not at a theological, but at a mundane human level.”³⁶ Others will remain opposed, in principle, until every Christian denomination issues a “crystal clear statement forswearing all attempts, organized, disorganized, haphazard, or even accidental, to convert Jews.”³⁷ We should surely be able to **summon the patience** to continue to work together in pursuit of peace and social justice, while **respecting any reluctance to further**  **engage.**

³⁶ Soloveitchik, *Confrontation*, 24.

³⁷ Isbell, *Orthodox Rabbinic Statement*.

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