Introduction:
The Transformative Work of Michael A. Signer

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The essays collected in this volume are dedicated to Michael A. Signer by a select group of his colleagues, students, and friends. Their collective purpose is to honor him, on the occasion of his thirty-fifth anniversary of teaching, as a scholar and teacher of Judaism, Christianity, and Jewish-Christian relations in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modernity. As Professor of Jewish History at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (1974-1992) and Abrams Professor of Jewish Thought and Culture at the University of Notre Dame (1992-present), Michael Signer, through his excellent teaching and wide-ranging scholarship, has contributed profoundly to the diverse fields of rabbinic Judaism, Jewish history, medieval studies, the history of scriptural exegesis, and Jewish-Christian relations. This book consists of entirely new work in one or more of these areas written specifically to honor Signer and his many contributions.

Michael Signer’s education at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and at the University of Toronto’s Centre for Medieval Studies, along with his training and experience as an ordained Reform rabbi have equipped him with a combination of scholarly expertise and pastoral gifts rarely found in the academy. Furthermore, from the time he wrote his dissertation (a critical edition of Andrew of St. Victor’s commentary on Ezekiel) at Toronto under the direction of the late Father Leonard Boyle, O.P., Signer has acquired and honed his skills as a scholar and religious leader in conversation and interaction with Christian scholars, pastors, and lay persons. Thus, Signer’s firm conviction that Judaism and Christianity are, in fact, and must always be
recognized as “two living traditions,” a principle that pervades his scholarly and pedagogical work, grows out of his own personal experiences with the Christian other.\(^1\) For over three decades, Michael Signer has conducted his scholarship while training both laity and clergy in Jewish and Catholic communities. As such he epitomizes the scholar/teacher who is not only well-versed in his academic field, but also able to mediate between that field and the broader contemporary world.\(^2\)

Signer’s academic career is squarely situated in the midst of and has contributed significantly to the transforming relations between Jews and Christians since the Second Vatican Council. Paragraph four of Nostra Aetate, the conciliar Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, effectively reversed the “teaching of contempt” for Jews and Judaism that had characterized Catholic teaching, proclamation, and practice for nearly two millennia. The council fathers acknowledged the strong “spiritual ties” that bind Christians to the Jewish people, rejected the deicide charge and supersessionism (along with their putative New Testament foundations), deplored all antisemitism, and encouraged the Christian faithful to recognize their Jewish neighbors as fellow human beings created in the image of God. Furthermore, the bishops sought to further “mutual understanding and appreciation” between Jews and Christians by advocating “biblical and theological enquiry and . . . friendly discussions.”\(^3\)

Throughout his career, Signer has engaged passionately and productively in precisely such interreligious study and amiable deliberation. For example, during his tenure at Hebrew Union College, he participated for over a decade in the Los Angeles Priest-Rabbi Dialogue. This group of seminary professors, pastors, and rabbis not only reflected on such theological issues as liturgy, covenant, and the Kingdom of God, but also initiated a professor-exchange program.
between Hebrew Union College and St. John’s Seminary in Camarillo. In 1988, Signer wrote about the personally transformative potential of such interreligious dialogue and mutual exchange, affirming, “I believe that the next twenty years of Nostra Aetate lie in this transformation of the individual Catholic or Jew.”

In the nearly two decades since penning these words, Signer has worked tirelessly to provide his students, both Jewish and Christian, with unique opportunities to engage in face-to-face Jewish-Christian dialogue and be transformed by encountering the other. For example, approximately every other Autumn since 2000, Signer, in his capacity as Director of the Notre Dame Holocaust Project, has accompanied about a dozen of his Christian students from Notre Dame to international Jewish-Christian symposia in such places central to the Shoah in Poland and Germany as Oswieçim (Auschwitz), Kraków, and Nuremberg. These symposia bring Jewish and Christian students and faculty from Poland, Germany, Israel, and the United States together: (1) to see places where the Nazis devised and executed their plan to destroy Europe’s Jewish population, such as the Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg or the concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, for example; (2) to hear historical lectures on such topics as Nazi ideology, Jewish life and culture in Germany prior to the Shoah, and Jewish-Catholic relations in Poland before and during World War II; (3) to read and study official Catholic documents such as “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah” (1998) and Jewish statements such as “Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity” (2000); and (4) to dialogue about what they have seen, heard, and read. Through these profound experiences, the Jew and the Christian together confront the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and triumphalism that paved the way for Nazi antisemitism and Jewish annihilation. They encounter one another as members of different religious communities that share certain things in common: they worship the same God,
seek authority from the same book (namely, the *Tanakh* or Old Testament), accept the moral principles of Torah, and are called to work together for a more just and peaceful world. They learn the profundity of Signer’s convictions that “the renewed relationship between Christians and Jews has a human face,” and “friendship and experience can have unprecedented consequences.” In short, inspired by Signer’s learned and passionate leadership, they themselves engage actively in transforming relations.

That Jews and Christians worship the same God, share authoritative Scriptures, recognize the inherent and inalienable dignity of every human being, and have an obligation to cooperate in bringing about the kingdom of God are significant affirmations that Michael Signer and several other prominent Jewish scholars, together constituting the National Jewish Scholars Project, have jointly contributed to the dialogue in “*Dabru Emet*: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity” (2000). Many quarters of the Jewish community in the United States and elsewhere have been reluctant, for various valid reasons, to engage in dialogue with their Christian counterparts or even recognize the sea change that has taken place in Christian teaching on Jews and Judaism since Vatican II. *Dabru Emet*, which first appeared as a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* on 10 September 2000 and gained the signatures of more than two hundred rabbis and Jewish scholars, marks the first major response from the Jewish community to Christian gestures of repentance and efforts at reformulating a more positive theology of Judaism. As a means of introducing a Jewish audience to Christian thinking on themes growing out of *Dabru Emet* (e.g., God, Scripture, commandment, Israel, worship, redemption, image of God), Signer and his National Jewish Scholars Project colleagues also edited a collection of essays published in 2000 entitled *Christianity in Jewish Terms*. This
volume is significant in that it represents the first Jewish theological exploration of the renewed relationship between Jews and Christians.  

Signer’s own essay in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, “Searching the Scriptures: Jews, Christians, and the Book,” stands as a kind of snapshot of his scholarly work in the history of Jewish and Christian biblical exegesis and the motivations that underlie it. His point of departure here is what he describes as “a significant point of contact between Jews and Christians,” namely, seeking the meaning of God’s word for their lives in authoritative Scripture. Yet, throughout the history of the Common Era, this has been more a point of divergence than convergence. The Jewish and Christian communities have distinguished themselves from one another by means of mutually exclusive and antagonistic exegeses. Indeed, Signer notes that while scholars are still engaged in explaining the initial “parting of the ways” between Jews and Christians, they are in agreement that “the interpretation of Scripture was at the heart of the separation.” The many scholarly articles that Signer has produced astutely demonstrate that “[t]he history of scriptural interpretation provides a significant point of entry for understanding the nature of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity during the past two millennia.”

Signer has broadened our understanding of the interreligious encounter considerably by highlighting the mutually disapproving, divisive, and destructive nature of much historical Christian and Jewish exegeses, on the one hand, and by unearthing resources within the interpretive tradition of both communities that might be used to promote a more positive relationship in the present and future. First, Signer never shies away from the polemical side of the historical and exegetical Jewish-Christian encounter. In fact, because he believes that our blazing a new trail together necessitates knowing the path we have hitherto trod, his work takes
every opportunity to invite the reader into the worlds of ancient and medieval interpretive confrontation, sometimes to the reader’s surprise. For example, in his overview of Rabbinic literature in the *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, Signer explains that the development of midrash during the Amoraic period in Eretz Israel may partially be the result of Jewish efforts to confront their Christian counterparts.\(^{16}\) *Genesis Rabbah* on the Akedah or sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22:1-18; *Gen. Rab.* 56.1-2) is the example of rabbinic response to Christianity that Signer offers. This midrash explains that once Abraham and Isaac see the “place” (Gen. 22:4; *maqom*, also a euphemism for God) where the former is to sacrifice the latter, Abraham commands the two young men accompanying them to “remain here with the ass” (Gen. 22:5) precisely because they do not see the place. Noting that other Jewish sources describe the Gentiles as “a nation resembling an ass,” Signer explains this midrash as affirming that Christians are like the ass, incapable of perceiving God. Furthermore, he situates this polemical reading within the vigorous Jewish-Christian debates of the third and fourth centuries concerning the verifiability of divine revelation and the possibility of God’s having revealed Himself to non-Jews at all.\(^{17}\) This reading of *Genesis Rabbah* on the Akedah illustrates how Signer uses Jewish-Christian relations as a lens through which to re-examine long-standing views in new, thought-provoking, and fruitful ways.

Signer’s scholarship has also contributed much to our understanding of the myriad ways that Christian thinkers and exegetes in late antiquity and the Middle Ages interpreted scriptural revelation over against Jews and Judaism. In his article, “The *Glossa ordinaria* and the Transmission of Medieval Anti-Judaism,” for example, Signer demonstrates how the standard scriptural gloss used by twelfth- and thirteenth-century schoolmen conveys and even intensifies certain themes found in the ancient *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition.\(^{18}\) For instance, he skillfully
shows how the author of the *Glossa* on the Pentateuch introduces into the Abraham narrative the malicious Johannine depiction of the Jews as children of the devil filled with vice. By means of interlinear glosses, the author interprets the Lord’s call to Abram to leave his country and his father’s house and journey to the land that the Lord will show him (Gen. 12:1) as really signifying the call from God the Father to the incarnate Christ to depart from the sins of the Jewish people from which he is descended as a human and from the home of the devil, and to enter into the land of the Gentiles of which the Lord would give him knowledge through the apostles.\(^{19}\) Additionally, Signer illustrates how the glossator on the Pentateuch, again by interlinear glosses, brings terms that had for centuries been integral to the patristic anti-Jewish arsenal of accusations such as *perditio, caecitas, duritia,* and *perfidia* into the very text of the Hebrew Bible.\(^ {20}\) Comparison with other twelfth-century commentaries such as Hugh of St. Victor’s *Adnotationes* on the Pentateuch, Andrew of St. Victor’s exegetical notes, Richard of St. Victor’s *Liber exceptionum,* and Peter Comestor’s *Historia scholastica* highlights the ardently anti-Jewish character of the *Glossa ordinaria.* Signer’s careful and contextual reading of the *Gloss* on the Pentateuch exemplifies the critical contributions he has made to our understanding of Christian anti-Jewish exegesis and polemic in the Middle Ages.

At the same time, Signer has shown that the history of Jewish and Christian interaction around the scriptural text is by no means entirely antagonistic.\(^ {21}\) In fact, much of his work seeks points of contact between the ancient and medieval Jewish-Christian exegetical encounter, on the one hand, and actual or desired efforts at cooperative study and dialogue since Vatican II, on the other. Indeed, according to Signer, “the most productive dialogue between Jews and Christians is grounded on face-to-face studies of texts in the Hebrew Bible through the lenses of pre-modern interpretations in both traditions.”\(^ {22}\) Signer has devoted much of his career to studying
what he identifies as an important historical model for modern Jewish-Christian interaction around the biblical text, namely, the exegetical encounters in northern France in the twelfth-century between the school of Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes (more commonly known as Rashi, 1040-1105), on the one hand, and Christian scholars associated with the Parisian Abbey of St. Victor, on the other.23 Advancing the work of Sarah Kamin, Frank Talmage, and other scholars who have demonstrated mutual influence between the school of Rashi and the School of St. Victor, Signer has established a common emphasis on peshato shel Miqra or sensus litteralis, the plain sense or simple meaning of the scriptural text.24 At the heart of this emphasis on the “letter” lies the search for what Signer has dubbed a “sequential narrative,” which he understands as a novel contribution to the exegetical tradition of both the Jewish and Christian communities.25 He explains:

The innovation of Rashi and the Victorines, I would argue, is the use of the narrative framework of Scripture as the basis of their commentaries in order to avoid the fragmentation or diffusion of the biblical text that they found in the literary forms of biblical commentary in their respective traditions. Their commentaries reveal a unity of theme or content where the biblical verse may seem disjointed. In order to realize this narrative unity, their commentaries develop exegetical techniques whereby biblical lemmata become embedded in the commentary. This process of embedding the biblical verse into the commentary itself provides the opportunity to “fill in the gaps” for the reader. In this manner Rashi would differ from the earlier midrashim, where the paradigmatic reading dominated. The Victorines differed from patristic commentary where the sequence of the verse was subordinated to a meditation on a single word or phrase.26

Signer’s scholarship reveals that while neither Rashi nor the Victorines denigrated or dispensed with traditional midrashic, figural, or allegorical interpretation, both believed these meanings must be built on or into the fundamental narrative of divine redemption that is emplotted in the biblical text.27 Having this redemptive narrative or historia as the fundamentum of all scriptural reading enabled both the Jewish and Christian communities to locate themselves within God’s continuing covenant. Thus, Signer has deftly shown that an emphasis on sequential
narrative and plain meaning served the needs of each religious community as it accommodated to life in the rapidly changing world of northern France during the twelfth-century renaissance.  

Signer has also well noted and thoroughly examined the ways in which Jewish and Christian efforts to understand the letter of Scripture enabled each religious community to understand the other more profoundly. For example, in his essay, “Polemic and Exegesis: The Varieties of Twelfth-Century Hebraism,” he shows how Christian scholars throughout the twelfth century, from Stephen Harding to Hugh and Andrew of St. Victor to Herbert of Bosham, gained insights into the Hebrew text of Scripture and its literal sense through scholarly interactions with their living Jewish counterparts. Indeed, contact with actual Jews is what appears to constitute the core of twelfth-century Christian Hebraism, Signer maintains. His emphasis on the centrality of Christian interaction with actual Jews around the scriptural text provides a necessary complement to Jeremy Cohen’s work on the so-called “hermeneutical Jew” within medieval Christianity. In his Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity (1999), Cohen analyzes how Christian exegetes from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas constructed an imaginary “hermeneutical Jew” from the scriptural text for their specific, most often anti-Jewish, theological purposes. Signer’s work lucidly illustrates how, by contrast, interaction with actual Jews enabled Christian scholars in the twelfth century to gain greater insight into the text of Hebrew Scripture, the Jewish tradition as living and diverse, and their own religious community and its history.

The essays in this volume seek to honor Michael Signer and the many ways his scholarship and teaching has contributed to the ongoing history of transforming relations between Jews and Christians. The volume is divided into two parts, which correspond to the two major historical periods in which Signer has studied the interreligious relationship. In Part One,
“Ancient and Medieval Perspectives: Exegesis, Polemic, and Cultural Exchange,” Signer’s colleagues and students present studies of Jewish and Christian encounters with the scriptural text and with one another in antiquity and the Middle Ages. The essays in Part Two, “Modern Perspectives: Theology, Praxis, and Perceptions of the Other,” both reveal the recent positive strides that Jews and Christians have made together and suggest roadblocks, either actual or potential, that may serve to delay contemporary interreligious progress.

Arnold Band, who taught Signer as an undergraduate student at UCLA, offers a brief introductory essay to Part One that provides a personal window onto Signer’s early formation in the reading and interpretation of religious texts, both Jewish and Christian, that would become the foundation of his scholarly work. By recounting some of his own interactions with Signer as teacher and student, Band highlights the profound care for the student that would become so characteristic of Signer’s own pedagogical work.

Following Band’s introductory piece, essays by David Novak and Israel Jacob Yuval analyze Jewish-Christian relations in the ancient period and underscore points of convergence between modes of thought and discourse in the two communities that are significant yet have been generally overlooked. In his essay, David Novak considers the divine law as a point of fundamental division between Jews and Christians from the ancient beginnings of their mutual encounter. He argues, however, that the law was and remains a point of contact between the two religious traditions. Indeed, the Rabbis and Paul, the most original theological authorities in Judaism and Christianity, respectively, shared an understanding of the pre-covenantal aspect of the law that might be called the “minimal law of God.” Furthermore, Novak demonstrates that even regarding the divine law that follows from the Sinai covenant, which law has deeply
divided Jews and Christians for two millennia, reconsidering the Rabbis and Paul can enable the two communities to come to a better understanding of themselves and the other.

In a similar vein, Israel Jacob Yuval examines the possibility of the influence of early Christian texts on the self-understanding of Judaism and the polemical presentation of Christianity found in the Talmud and Midrashim. Yuval sets his own approach here against what he understands as a principled outlook in modern Jewish research, epitomized by work of Saul Lieberman and Ephraim Elimelech Urbach, that “systematically ignores the possibility of points of contact between Christianity and Judaism.” In an effort to overcome this traditional posture of “parallelophobia,” the scholarly fear of seriously considering the possibility of mutual influence between the two communities, Yuval advocates “parallelomania,” that is, searching for parallel and dialogic developments in the ancient literature. Using James Scott’s idea of “hidden transcripts” in conjunction with the anthropological theory of Fredrik Barth, Yuval argues that, although Rabbinic Judaism created a highly developed world of halakhic texts and their meaning that was closed off from its surroundings, one can find within this world and its literature hidden polemics against Christianity that reveal dialogue and mutual influence.

The next six essays in Part One treat various aspects of Christian and Jewish scriptural exegesis in twelfth-century northern France, a field of study that has benefited much from the scholarly endeavors of Michael Signer. Dale Coulter introduces these essays and the literal approach that characterized the interpretive enterprise of the Victorines and their Jewish counterparts by reconstructing the “theoretical framework” for Hugh of St. Victor’s method. The foundation of this framework is *historia*, which Hugh takes to be the meaning attached to a series or narration of events (what Coulter designates “history I”) and the primary meaning or referent of a word (what Coulter designates “history II”). Through a careful consideration of a
variety of passages from Hugh’s corpus related to exegetical theory and practice, Coulter highlights the multivalence, even ambiguity, of the Victorine master’s understanding of *historia* and literal reading. It is precisely this indeterminate aspect of Hugh’s theory, Coulter concludes, that enabled his students to receive and appropriate his thought on historical or literal interpretation differently. That this is so is demonstrated in the following essays by Boyd Taylor Coolman and Franklin T. Harkins, which analyze the exegetical practice of Richard of St. Victor and Andrew of St. Victor, respectively. Coolman considers Richard’s reading of Isaiah 7:14, *Behold a virgin will conceive . . .*, the controversial text that prompted the Victorine’s *De Emmanuele*, in the context of the renewed interest among both Christian and Jewish exegetes in the scriptural letter and the larger narrative in which a particular text is situated. Coolman argues that Richard’s Christological interpretation of Isaiah’s prophecy emerges in relation to various similar and dissimilar correspondences between the content of the prophecy and the overarching narrative of Christian salvation history. According to Richard, Jewish exegetes read Isaiah’s prophecy within a narrative framework that is simply too narrow, namely, that of Isaiah 7-8; by expanding the context to the significantly larger narrative of creation, fall, and restoration, Richard aims to provide a more reasonable reading of this pivotal text. In so doing, Coolman concludes, Richard draws on Hugh’s understanding of the relationship between narrative and reason.

Andrew of St. Victor was another of Hugh’s students who, through face-to-face encounters with Jewish biblical scholars in his Parisian context, converted his master’s theory into a distinctive practice of literal reading. By considering the respective readings of the story of Esau and Jacob (Gen. 25 and 27) found in the *Glossa ordinaria* and in Andrew of St. Victor, Franklin T. Harkins highlights the way in which the biblical text, as read in the Christian schools
of twelfth-century northern France, served as a springboard for both “polemical and partnering” trajectories in Jewish-Christian relations. More specifically, Harkins demonstrates that whereas the *Glossa* canonized the traditional Christian allegorical reading of the siblings as the Jewish people and the church, respectively, Andrew followed his ancient and contemporary sources – including the *Glossa* itself – “with unequal step” in the production of an alternative reading that was informed by and further opened the way to positive interreligious relations.

Deborah L. Goodwin hones in on a particular aspect of the scriptural story of Esau and Jacob over which medieval exegetes – both Jewish and Christian – spilled much ink, namely, Rebekah’s seemingly duplicitous actions in securing Isaac’s blessings for her younger beloved son, Jacob. Goodwin takes Rebekah’s action in the narrative of Gen. 25-27 as a prism through which to analyze and compare the exegetical approaches of two skilled twelfth-century readers of the sacred text, one Jewish and one Christian: Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) and Peter Comestor. Goodwin argues that whereas both Rashbam and Comester were practitioners of the literal or historical methodology that had recently come to characterize their respective communities, each exegete read Rebekah’s actions in such a way that served his own theological and polemical goals. In Rashbam and Comester, then, Goodwin finds further evidence for a foundational presupposition of Michael Signer’s own scholarly work, namely, that for Jewish and Christian exegetes in twelfth-century Europe the biblical text served simultaneously as a point of contact and of contention.

Sara Japhet seeks to shed new light on the exegetical method and intellectual milieu of Rashbam by studying the introductions to two of his commentaries on biblical books, namely, the Song of Songs and Lamentations. These introductions provide a unique window onto Rashbam and the context of Jewish exegesis in which he worked precisely because the sages of
the Peshat school of northern France generally did not compose introductions to their commentaries. Furthermore, Japhet here presents and discusses Rashbam’s introduction to Lamentations for the first time. Her study reveals that in the scope of his interests as well as in his literary acumen, Rashbam stood alone among Jewish biblical commentators of the twelfth century.

Moving from Jewish and Christian exegetical practice in the twelfth century to a popular medieval Christian theological construct of Jews, E. Ann Matter traces the development of the image of the Wandering Jew in the High and Late Middle Ages. Matter shows that the legend of the Wandering Jew, a trope on the story of the Via crucis that assumed a seemingly ubiquitous status in western Christian literature of the thirteenth through fifteenth century, has its roots in the twelfth-century emphasis, exemplified by Honorius Augustodunensis and Andrew of St. Victor, on the conversion of the Jews as one of the signs of the End Times. The earliest extant versions of the legend depict the Wandering Jew as having been cursed by Christ to roam the earth until the latter’s second advent as a punishment for having insulted the Savior on the way to his sacrificial death. In different interpretations of the story, however, the Wanderer appears in different times and places, in various guises, and for a whole range of purposes, both good and evil. According to a fifteenth-century Italian account, for example, in the winter of 1411 the Wanderer mysteriously appeared in Florence wearing a Franciscan habit, where he rescued travelers from a sudden snow storm. Matter demonstrates that the various portraits of the Wandering Jew together reveal the fundamentally ambivalent attitude of medieval Christians – indeed, medieval Christendom – toward the Jewish people: on the one hand, they are fugitives on account of their scornful treatment of Jesus; on the other hand, they testify to the truth of Christianity until the end of the world.
In an effort to honor Michael Signer and his fruitful work with others, Lesley Smith offers a study of the collaborative work of the thirteenth-century Dominican master and administrator Hugh of St. Cher. Smith here reconsiders the question, much contested among modern scholars, of the authorship of Hugh’s most well-known work, the Postilla in totam bibliam. The commonly accepted scholarly view is that the Postilla, a multi-volume commentary on the entire Bible, is simply too massive a work for Hugh to have written by himself. As such, Hugh is seen not as a brilliant individual thinker, but rather a mere collaborator, the director of a group of Dominican brothers at St. Jacques who together produced the Postilla. Against this reading, Smith argues that collaboration was the common mode of work among Mendicant scholars in the thirteenth century, and that modern historians have erred in preferring not to think of the great scholars of this period (including Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas) as anything other than solitary geniuses. She helpfully reminds us of the need to study medieval scholars and their work not only within their larger religious context but also according to their own standards.

Within two centuries of the collaborative exegetical work of Hugh of St. Cher, scholastic modes of thought and discourse had begun to wane in many European religious circles and were being replaced by what has been dubbed a “theology of piety,” whose principal purpose was devotional rather than speculative. It is within this context that Arjo Vanderjagt situates and studies the northern humanist of Groningen, Wessel Gansfort (1419-1489), and his use of Hebrew. After providing a brief biographical sketch of Gansfort, Vanderjagt analyzes how he makes use of Hebrew in three of his major works, namely, De oratione Dominica, De causis incarnationis; de magnitudine et amaritudine Dominicae passionis, and De sacramento Eucharistiae. Vanderjagt argues that, as the titles of these works intimate, Gansfort cited texts
from and explored terms in the Hebrew Bible in order to deepen his own and his Christian readers’ knowledge of and devotion to Jesus, not as a means of dialoguing with his Jewish counterparts. In fact, Gansfort often used Hebrew texts simultaneously to bolster Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and to variously polemicize against the Jews.

In the final essay in Part One, Jeremy Cohen provides a unique window onto the changing nature of the Jewish-Christian encounter in early sixteenth-century Europe by considering a story from Solomon ibn Verga’s work, *Shevet Yehudah (The Staff of Judah)*, about the rescue of Jews from a slanderous libel owing to the sleeplessness of their king. *Shevet Yehudah*, containing some six dozen stories of Jewish tribulation and survival from the destruction of the Second Temple in the first century C.E. to the persecution of Spanish-Portuguese Jewry in ibn Verga’s own day, was one of the most popular Hebrew books of the sixteenth century. By means of a thorough investigation of one of the book’s stories in which Jewish exoneration from the charge of ritual murder hangs on the correct interpretation of the Psalmists words, “See, the guardian of Israel neither dozes nor sleeps” (Ps. 121:4), Cohen shows how *Shevet Yehudah* serves as a bridge between Jewish self-understanding in the Middle Ages and in the early modern period. More specifically, Cohen argues that the tale under consideration expresses ibn Verga’s and his religious community’s determination to leave the Jewish-Christian encounter of the Middle Ages behind and move into a qualitatively new era.

Part Two of the present volume consists of essays that treat various aspects of the qualitatively different relationship that has come to prevail between Jews and Christians in the modern period, particularly since the middle of the twentieth century. In his brief introductory essay, Peter von der Osten-Sacken reads the dictum of a late-nineteenth-century rabbi in the German army, “What we need is to get to know, to understand, and to respect each other,” as a
helpful guideline for the contemporary Jewish-Christian relationship. Careful to nuance the military chaplain’s words in light of both the past and recent history of the two communities, von der Osten-Sacken rightly recognizes the limits of and potential pitfalls involved in mutual understanding. Here he draws, for example, on Martin Buber’s notion that in dialogue Jews and Christians are centered around a mystery whose status as mystery remains ultimately unaltered by the interreligious encounter, and that each partner should therefore strive to recognize the other in the mystery as he or she is.

Angela Kim Harkins illustrates the potential dangers of failing to understand the other religious community on its own terms in her essay on the Second Vatican Council’s use of the phrase “the people of God.” While recognizing the importance of populus Dei as a post-conciliar ecclesial model, Harkins maintains that the expression as it is used in the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) is problematic from the perspective of contemporary Jewish-Christian relations. The problem, as she sees it, is twofold, namely: (1) “the people of God” is not a phrase that ancient Israel used to describe itself; rather it is a Christian theological construct that the bishops impose upon biblical Judaism; and (2) Lumen Gentium describes ancient Israel with scriptural references that highlight exclusivity and thereby set up Israel as a contrasting type to the Church, the new and more inclusive “people of God.” Furthermore, Harkins argues, the expression “the people of God” is complicated by the difficult social and political context in which the phrase first appeared in modern biblical scholarship. In light of the terrible history of the “hermeneutical Jew” and the Adversus Iudaeos tradition generally, Harkins concludes: “It is important that bishops and Christian theologians draw upon a sound historical understanding of actual Jews and Jewish self-understandings when they construct their theologies of Jews and Judaism or of the Church in relation to the Jewish people.”
David Ellenson considers one modern instantiation of Jewish teaching on Christianity and its adherents by analyzing the pertinent responsa of Rabbi Hayim David Halevi (1924-1998), Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa and one of the most famous rabbinic authorities in Israel during the twentieth century. Ellenson focuses on a particular responsum, “Concerning the Relationships between Jews and Non-Jews,” which appears in Rabbi Halevi’s nine-volume collection of response entitled ‘Aseh l’kha rav. In order to highlight the mature thought of Rabbi Halevi on Christians and Christianity, Ellenson reads this responsum against the backdrop of some of his other responsa as well as those of one of his major rivals, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, former Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel and Founder and Head of the Israeli Shas party. Ellenson shows how Rabbi Halevi’s approach to traditional Jewish legal material on Christians is, in the words of Avi Ravitsky, one of “conservative audacity.” Acknowledging, for example, that the Talmud and rabbinic tradition speak strongly against “idolatry” and associate it with Christian Trinitarianism, Rabbi Halevi maintained that these statements do not refer to Christians in the modern context. Additionally, Rabbi Halevi further opened the way to respectful relations with the Christian “other” by affirming that ethical human obligations constitute a meta-principle informing the entire Jewish legal tradition.

The next two essays, by Peter Ochs and John T. Pawlikowski, engage the scholarly work of Michael Signer directly. According to Peter Ochs, Signer’s scholarship on plain-sense exegesis in medieval Judaism and Christianity reveals a general theological philosophy of the plain sense, a philosophy that introduces a model for text-historical studies and for reparative work in the area of contemporary Jewish-Christian relations. By providing an overview of Signer’s work and through closer readings of several of his essays, Ochs seeks to provide evidence of this philosophy and to outline its defining features. The basic elements of Signer’s
The precise nature of the theological relationship or bond between Jews and Christians is the focus of John T. Pawlikowski’s dialogue with Michael Signer. After providing a brief overview of Signer’s understanding of the theological nexus between Jews and Christians as it is found in a number of essays on various aspects of the interreligious relationship, Pawlikowski – in the spirit of mutual respect that is so central to the ongoing dialogue – raises several important questions that may be addressed to Signer and notes several areas where his perspective may require further elaboration. First, Pawlikowski inquires whether Signer’s emphasis on studying how Jews and Christians have traditionally interpreted their common biblical texts (Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament) as a means of recognizing a certain bondedness through difference reveals an overly optimistic approach to classical modes of interpretation. Secondly, Pawlikowski maintains that Signer’s understanding of the Jewish-Christian relationship must give greater consideration to the New Testament and to the portrayals of Jesus provided there, which would enable a deeper appreciation of the theological rift that separates the two faith communities. But do the church’s Christological proclamations make viewing Jesus as a limited philosophy as identified by Ochs are: (1) Presupposition of the plain sense; (2) Presupposition of the limits of plain sense and the need for interpreted senses; (3) Recognition of the need to “return” to the plain sense without losing the interpreted sense; (4) Observation of parallels between the reparative strategies of both medieval Jewish and Christian plain-sense commentaries; and (5) Acknowledgment of the reparative potential of plain-sense reading for both intra-communal divisions and Jewish-Christian relations. Ochs concludes his piece by highlighting the ways in which Signer’s theological philosophy is a “reparative hermeneutic,” that is, a practice of reading both signs on a page and signs in the world toward the ultimate end of repairing relations within and between religious communities.
bond between Jews and Christians virtually impossible? In Pawlikowski’s view, the new scholarly understanding of the gradual nature of the Jewish-Christian separation in the first centuries of the Common Era as well as the reaffirmation of Christianity’s profound Jewish roots raise a number of pressing questions for Signer’s understanding of the relationship. Finally, Pawlikowski asks whether the experience of the Holocaust has undermined covenental certitude on both sides of the interreligious divide, and invites Signer to grapple in a more comprehensive way with the implications of the Shoah for contemporary Jewish-Christian bonding.

The last two essays in the volume, by David Fox Sandmel and Hanspeter Heinz, consider from very different angles how the contemporary churches – both Protestant and Catholic – understand the bond or relationship between themselves and the Jewish people. David Fox Sandmel investigates the ways in which the relatively recent dramatic changes in Christian perceptions of Jews and Judaism are reflected in what he calls the “Christian reclamation of Judaism.” Here he presents some examples of this complex phenomenon, suggests factors contributing to it, and reflects on its implications for Jewish-Christian relations now and in the future. Sandmel notes at the outset that whereas the primary participants in the dialogue historically have been Jews, Roman Catholics, and mainline Protestants, the general trend toward the incorporation of Jewish traditions and practices into Christian worship and spirituality is most pronounced in the evangelical community. Among the elements of Judaism that increasing numbers of evangelical churches are incorporating and appropriating are: (1) Hebrew terms and songs; (2) Jewish ritual items such as menorahs, shofars, and mezuzot; (3) The bar/bat mitzvah; and (4) The Passover Seder. Some of the factors influencing these modes of reclamation include the increasing appreciation by Christians of the Jewishness of Jesus, a claim to kinship with the Jewish people, the impact of the Holocaust on Christian self-understanding, the existence of the
state of Israel, the emergence of Christian Zionism, and the influence of Jews for Jesus and similar “messianic Jewish” organizations. Sandmel suggests that, while some Jews might welcome this Christian reclamation of Judaism as indicative of a positive attitudinal shift among Christians, for most it represents a step backwards toward traditional Christian supersessionism and, as such, poses serious challenges to the future of Jewish-Christian relations.

Hanspeter Heinz brings this volume in honor of Michael Signer to a fitting close by recounting the ways in which his friendship and interreligious work with Signer has profoundly transformed his own understanding of Judaism and Christianity’s bond with it. Heinz describes the strides that have been made in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue since *Nostra Aetate*, often in spite of considerable obstacles that have threatened to slow progress. The particular focus of his essay is what Heinz dubs “the latest setback,” Pope Benedict XVI’s *motu proprio* rescript entitled *Summorum Pontificum* pertaining to the Tridentine rite and its wider re-admission. Heinz describes the work of the discussion group “Jews and Christians” of the Central Committee of German Catholics (*Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken*), of which he is President and Signer a member, in anticipation of and in reaction to the *motu proprio*. From the time of its announcement just before Easter in 2007, the discussion group voiced its objection to the promulgation of a *motu proprio* that would more generally allow the celebration of the pre-conciliar Mass of the 1962 *Missale Romanum*. In short, the group “Jews and Christians” claimed that the re-introduction of the Good Friday Intercession “for the conversion of the Jews” and of other elements of the Tridentine rite favors contempt for the Jews and disregard for the Old Testament, and contradicts the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. What Heinz finds most troubling about the *motu proprio* that Pope Benedict issued on 7 July 2007 is that it suggests little or no concern for the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish
people and how this fragile relationship might be damaged by the rescript itself. Heinz concludes his contribution by affirming his own and the discussion group’s firm commitment, in the face of this recent obstacle from Rome, to continue to work toward a better relationship between Jews and Christians. All of us, as contributors to this volume, hope that these essays will complement and continue the passionate and transformative work of Michael Signer, our esteemed colleague, teacher, and friend.

Notes


2 Samuel Sandmel contrasts the “scholar/teacher” with the “scholar/antiquarian” in his essay, “Antiquarianism and Contemporaneity: The Relevance of Studies in Religion,” in Two Living Traditions, 20-27. Whereas the “scholar/antiquarian” is focused narrowly on his academic field and the analytic skills that it requires, the “scholar/teacher” possesses an openness to the world along with the synthetic skills to connect scholarly analysis and practical experience. Michael Signer has described his own interest in this nexus between theory and


5 As Michael’s graduate student and teaching assistant at the University of Notre Dame, I had the distinct privilege of attending three of these symposia, namely: “Theology at the Edge of Auschwitz,” Oswiecim, Poland, 29 September – 5 October 2002; “Building Toward the Future: Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Inter-cultural Context,” Kraków, Poland, 14-20 September 2003; and “Memory and Reconciliation: Jewish-Christian Relations in Cultural Context,” Nuremberg, Germany, 11-17 September 2005.


The five scholars at the heart of the National Jewish Scholars Project are Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Sandmel, and Michael Signer.

For full citation, see n. 6 above.


See Frymer-Kensky et al., Christianity in Jewish Terms, 85-98.


Signer, “Searching the Scriptures,” 89.


19 Signer, “The *Glossa ordinaria*,” 593-94.


21 In Michael’s view, “To continue the agenda of revealing the continuity of anti-Judaism within Christianity without adding elements in which Christianity drew upon Judaism is to draw a false dichotomy in the relationship” (“The Aim and Objectives of Judaeo-Christian Studies,” 75).


23 See Signer, “Speculum Concilii,” where he specifically affirms: “The ‘dialogue’ at St. Victor did not reveal a post-Vatican II tolerance, but it does provide a significant historical precedent” (122).


25 On his term “sequential narrative” in Jewish exegesis of the period, see Signer, “The Land of Israel,” especially 213.

26 Signer, “Restoring the Narrative,” 71-72.

exegesis reveals a greater sensitivity to figural language in the biblical text than Christian exegetes have traditionally imagined.

28 See Signer, “Peshat, Sensus Litteralis, and Sequential Narrative”; and Signer, “Restoring the Narrative,” where he concludes: “For the Jewish people in the late eleventh century, their lowly status and the growing strength of the Christian Church were the source of some anxiety about the possibilities of future redemption. Christians were experiencing confusion about the future directions of their sense of religious community and the fragmentation of theological knowledge. The resolution for each community . . . may have rested in the shift from a metaphoric to a metonymic reading of scripture. To domesticate a narrative by limiting the potential expansions of its meanings provides a center from which members may diverge, but still define themselves. The lives of Jews and Christians in northern France diverged in their rites, rituals, and theology, but not in their goal – the discovery of a narrative that fused biblical text and ancient traditions for members of their communities” (79).