In this volume, which is based on his doctoral dissertation, Edward Kessler of Cambridge Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations in the United Kingdom presents an investigation of the Jewish-Christian relation during the “formative period,” that is, the first six centuries of the first millennium of the Common Era, prior to the Muslim conquest of Palestine (635 C.E.). He attempts to demonstrate how the expounding of the Aqedah story (Gen 22:1–14) by Jews and Christians influenced each other in a compelling two-way encounter. Based on a study of this story, he examines whether there was some sort of an exchange or interaction between Jews and Christians and to what extent they are bound by the common Scripture, Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.1

The book is structured as follows: prologue and introduction at the opening; conclusion and epilogue at the end, and in between the main section of the book. In his introduction the author details the methodological problems that should be challenged and the criteria that he developed as a response. He critically reviews three previous approaches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the examination of Jewish-Christian relations in late antiquity, which failed to achieve scholarly consensus. Therefore, Kessler suggests a

fourth: the study of Jewish-Christian biblical exegesis, which is a supplementary to the earlier three: “A study of biblical interpretation can shed light on Jewish-Christian relations because both Jews and Christians lived in a biblically oriented culture . . . because, to a certain extent, Jews and Christians shared a common Bible” (18-19).

The main section of the book comprises seven chapters. The first six examine interpretive writing on Gen 22:1–14 (37–152). They follow the order of biblical narrative, verse by verse. Each chapter opens with the English translated text, Masoretic Text, and Septuagint (in this order!), which follows with a review of writers such as Philo and Josephus and with a survey and analysis of the early Jewish and Christian interpretations. In addition, the author checks some liturgical writings, that is, *piyyutim* (Jewish religious poetry) and *kontakia* (Christian hymns that deal mostly with biblical stories). These writings reflect interpretation of the biblical narrative, though the texts are from a much later period (ca. tenth century), but have much earlier roots. Chapter 7 brings another dimension: it discusses the artistic interpretation (153–74) and accordingly is accompanied by thirteen illustrations from Jewish and Christian art as well as archaeological discoveries. This section ends with a detailed conclusion (175–83).

In a short epilogue (184–88) Kessler reviews some recent exegesis of the Aqedah story in order to show to what extent this story affects Jewish-Christian connections. Primary and secondary sources (189–211) and indexes of subjects and authors as well as ancient texts conclude the volume (212–22).

The main issue that this reviewer quibbles with Kessler on is his core presumption. His starting point is that Jews and Christians share a sacred text: they are bound together by the Bible. In this book he inquires if they also share a “common exegetical tradition” (6). This assumption, however, is not self-understood. This is not only because the Jews reject the Christians’ New Testament and the latter reject the Jewish “Oral Torah,” as the author correctly stresses, but mainly because of several other important differences between the two, differences that, unfortunately, the author overlooks. Thus, one must admit that Jews and Christians dispute not only about the name of that part of the Bible that they share, that is, Mikra, Tanach, Hebrew Bible versus Old Testament (and it is far beyond of being an unimportant issue), but even—or mainly—about its extent. They dispute whether to include in or exclude from that part books such as Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sira/Jesus the Sirach, and Baruch. They dispute over the extant of the very books which that part includes, for instance, some additional texts to several compositions such as Daniel (chs. 13–14), as well as concerning the order of the books and their locations. Thus, for instance, the place of the books of Ruth, Lamentations, and Daniel, on the one hand, and the place of the whole complex of the prophetical writings on the other are different in the Hebrew Bible than in the Christian Old Testament. All
these dissimilarities reflect deep theological diversities. Moreover, even about the same common texts that are included in both Jewish and Christian corpora, there is not only a different interest (Torah versus Prophets) but also a very bitter controversy about the “correct” meaning and religious validity of even the same textual version (either Masoretic Text or Septuagint). While the Christians consider their Old Testament as the first part that relates the preparation (Vorgeschichte) for the following and the most important part of their Biblia, the New Testament, the Jews consider the Hebrew Bible as the one and only most important Holy Scripture of their religion (the rabbinic writings are considered as secondary compared to the Tanach). Moreover, there is a deep gap between the Jewish attitude toward the Hebrew Bible as a living authoritative Scripture of which every Jew must follow its commandments, especially as expressed in the Written Torah and interpreted and conceptualized in the Oral Torah. Christians, on the other hand, believe that with the arrival of Jesus the entire Torah’s commandments became irrelevant and they are not obliged to follow them whatsoever (e.g., Rom 10:4; 13:10). They interpret various Old Testament texts—stories as well as law—essentially allegorically. Thus, for instance, according to Christianity the law of circumcision commandment (Gen 17) applies spiritually—to the heart—rather than to literal, actual circumcision of the flesh (Rom 2:29). Jews still wait for the biblical messianic promises such as in the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, on the one hand, while Christians consider the Old Testament as a cluster of “promises” (Verheissungen) that were, in fact, already fulfilled by the appearance, life, and death of Jesus Christ (Erfüllung).

Consequently, the very common texts of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament generally are not used as a starting point for better mutual understanding and acceptance of each other; on the contrary, they deepened the dispute, animosity, and conflict between the sister religions over thousands of years.

Indeed, as Kessler details in his prologue to the book, in the last generations, especially since the time following the Holocaust (Sho‘ah), there have been several positive actions from both sides, Christian and Jewish, particularly in the United States and some (but not all) Western European countries. These groups attempt to change the situation and build a new and better understanding, mutual acceptance, and respectful handling of each other. But is it really the case also in the “formative period”? Is not the author somehow imposing, anachronistically, his hopes upon the tragic history of Jews and Christians and


attempting to color it favorably? Did the classical rabbis really see Jesus as a “great brother” as formed by Martin M. Buber? Could they—the monotheistic believers who proclaimed three times a day “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is alone!” (Deut 6:4)—consider one, even a fellow Jew, as a biological son of God? Indeed, Jews and Christians share, in spite of all, a great quantity of common biblical texts. But did they really share also the interpretation of these texts? Did the interpretation of the common text bind Jews and Christians or just the opposite? Thus, for instance, did the interpretation of Gen 22 by Barnabas—“[Jesus was the fulfillment of] that which was foreshadowed in Isaac, who was sacrificed upon the altar” (7:3)—bind Jews and Christians or, contrarily, divide them?

Furthermore, there is dispute on very fundamental issues such as: Who is “Israel” of the Old Testament? Jews, of course, see themselves as direct descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the twelve Israelite tribes. On the other hand, Christianity sees itself as a legitimate heir of the “biblical Israel.” Consequently, Christians consider themselves as a “new Israel,” “Israel in spirit,” while the existing Jews are considered just as “heretic” or “talmudic Jews.” They make deliberate changes in the biblical text in order to sustain this theological perspective. Thus, for example, they change the original Hebrew text of Jer 2:3: “Israel is holy for God,” and write: “Israel was holy for God.”4 According to Christianity, the Scriptures as well as the covenant and God’s promises were applied to Christians and them only, not to the Jews (Barnabas 4:6–8; Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho the Jew; Augustine, PL 42:51–64; and others). Now, how do these Christian theological concepts of rejection and replacement go together with the Bound by the Bible approach?

It seems that Kessler ignores the entire bitter history of Jews and Christians and their disputes over the interpretation of the common text—Hebrew Bible/Old Testament—as well as the fundamental theological issues, while attempting to “color the past” according to some blessed new direction in the present and his wishful thinking.

Kessler attempts to show that alongside these Christian teachings there also developed an “admiration for Judaism.” By study of an exegetical encounter he tries to tell us a “story of a two-way encounter and existence of a more mutually beneficial relationship” (19). As an example he points out that “the willingness by Christians to order the Hebrew Bible in a canonical form recognized by Jews demonstrates a common biblically oriented culture, shared by Jews and Christians. In other words, the Christian canon is itself indicative of Jewish influence” (19–20, with reference to W. Horbury 1992, 80–91). This

reviewer does not share these arguments of the author. First, the Christians did not include “the Hebrew Bible in a canonical form”; rather, they included what they name Old Testament with all the differences mentioned above. Second, the inclusion of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible is not due to their “goodwill” toward Jews, and thus it does not reflect a genuine positive attitude toward Judaism. The inclusion is part of “replacement theology” as detailed above and the result of some historical circumstances as I related elsewhere: “they are somehow connected theologically to each other presumably sometime in an early stage of Christianity, when the Jewish-Christians accepted the new religious direction but simultaneously associated it with their original heritage” (see Kalimi, *Early Jewish Exegesis and Theological Controversy*, 147–48). In fact, as of today the relationship between the “Old” and “New” Testaments remains an unresolved problem in Christianity. Through generations many Christian theologians were and are questioning this connection repeatedly. For example, to cite Antonius H. J. Gunneweg, “the definition of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments is the most difficult historical and theological question faced by Christians.” Thus, the inclusion of the Old Testament, due to some historical circumstances and Christians’ needs, does not prove that there existed a positive encounter between the Jews and Christians. The decisive point is the place of Old Testament in the Christian canon, their attitude toward it and its interpretation and conceptualization—all issues that are distinctively different from those of the Jews.

Certainly, there are some exceptions to the frequent hard and hostile lines of the church toward the Jews and Judaism, as Kessler demonstrates, for instance, from the *Adversus Iudaeos* sermons of John “Chrysostom” (= “Golden Mouth,” born in Antioch, probably in 349). However, these exceptions prove that the antagonistic relationship generally existed and mainly defined the relationship between the Jews and Christians, indubitably in the period that Kessler concentrates on. Generally speaking, the common holy texts not only did not bind the Jews and Christians in this and other periods, but just the opposite: they created a bitter controversy and separation that increased continually and escalated, resulting in the horrible tragic history that dominated the last two thousand years.

Now, there is of course some overlap in Jewish and Christian interpretation of the very common texts. Kessler is aware of the limitations of such an overlap and asks “whether and to what extent Jews and Christians encountered each other on the level of biblical interpretation” (6). He strives to show “the possibility of an exegetical encounter that

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exists because the Jews and Christians share a similar and somehow overlapping heritage. . . . some interpretations may offer examples of mutual awareness, influence and even encounter” (6–7, italics added). Elsewhere Kessler explains what he means by the expression “exegetical encounter”: “a Jewish interpretation either influenced, or influenced by, a Christian interpretation and vice versa. The term does not imply that Jewish and Christian exegetes met to discuss their interpretations (although this is a possibility); rather, an exegetical encounter indicates awareness by one exegete of the exegetical tradition of another, revealed in the interpretations” (8). Thus, by examining Gen 22, especially the Palestinian rabbinic tradition and the work of the Greek fathers, Kessler attempts to show existence of such encounters in late antiquity. He repeatedly stresses that the extent of the encounters still influences the Jewish-Christian connection in the present, “since the study of the Bible and its Jewish and Christian interpretation is becoming more and more popular in contemporary dialogue between the two” (5, 7, 24).

Well, this is not an easy task, and it seems that the author makes a great effort, despite all the above-mentioned problems, to find at least some encounters, though very limited, between Jews and Christians.

There is much to say on various contents and particular issues of this book. Due to the shortness of space, following are just some critical remarks, for example. Kessler correctly states that the story of Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of Isaac was an important passage for Jews and Christians from an early time. However, since the story is related to the Temple Mount already in various sources of the Hebrew Bible (Gen 22:14; 2 Chr 3:1) in order to enhance the sanctity of it as a place chosen for sacrifices at the patriarch era,6 it is inaccurate to say that it became important for Jews “as early as the third century CE” (5).

One of Kessler’s reasons for choosing Gen 22 as a central case study of his Bound by the Bible is that “Genesis 22 was an important and controversial story for both Jews and Christians from a very early period” (30). He brings two examples for this argument, and the second one is: “Pseudo-Philo also mentions that the biblical story is a source of controversy and attacks those who ‘malign’ God (LAB 32:4).” A careful reading of this source, however, did not prove Kessler’s claim. Liber Antiquatitum Biblicarum 32:4 accounts: “the Most Powerful hastened and sent forth his voice from on high saying: ‘You shall not slay your son, nor shall you destroy the fruit of your body. For now I have appeared so as to reveal you to those who do not know you (variant: ‘to reveal myself to those who do not know me’), and have shut the mouth of those who are always speaking evil against you.” From the context of this paragraph emerges that “those who are always

speaking evil against you (= Abraham)” relate, most probably, to “all the angels were jealous of him, and the worshiping hosts envied him,” that was mentioned earlier in verse 2.\(^7\) Thus, it has nothing to do with Jewish-Christian controversy on Gen 22.

Kessler understands the rabbis emphasis of Isaac’s superiority (42–43), as follow: “in order to explain why Isaac was chosen, rather than Ishmael, as the designated heir of Abraham. The interpretation ... legitimizes his (= Isaac) election... these were necessary interpretations to rabbis compelled of explain why the biblical command of Deuteronomy 21.15–21 ... was not applicable in the case of Isaac” (43). I doubt this very much. Since Isaac’s election as Abraham’s only heir was by God, even prior to his birth (Gen 17:19, 21; 21:12), there is no need whatsoever for rabbis to legitimize it. There was also no necessity for the rabbis to explain why the Deuteronomistic command was not applicable in the case of Isaac, since God who commanded in Deuteronomy himself preferred Isaac over Ishmael (again, even before Isaac’s birth!). Thus, the divine preference of Isaac in spite of the command in Deuteronomy just enforces Isaac’s election and makes it more evident than any supposed rabbinic explanation.

At the end of his volume, Kessler puts together a good list of primary and secondary sources (196–211). There is, however, some inconsistency in the citing of the sources in the work. Thus, for example: (1) in the primary sources Josephus’s work *Antiquitates Judaicae* appears in three forms: “Ant.” (41), “Ant” (81 n. 1; 120 nn. 4 and 8), and “Ant.” (120 n. 9); (2) in the secondary sources, the series names are mentioned occasionally (see 197, where ICC is missing from Batten’s commentary, and 200, where WBC is missing from Dunn’s commentary; on the other hand, on 207 Noort’s collection series is mentioned).

The author lists some collective articles’ volumes, such as Ed Noort et al., eds., *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations* (Themes in Biblical Narrative; Leiden: Brill, 2002). Though Kessler cites Hilhorst’s essay from this collection, generally he fails to detail exactly which studies were written by whom. In addition, some studies are mentioned in the bibliography (for instance, I. Kalimi, on 204) but are missing completely in the book’s text and footnotes as well as in the authors’ index. Thus, the reader does not get any idea what was exactly used by the author, which opinions, assumptions, and interpretations in fact are accepted by him, assimilated in his writing, and with which he disagrees.

Furthermore, the author overlooked several important studies on the topic under review, both monographs and articles, that would enrich and sharpen his reading and insight. To

\(^7\) See also *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 55:4.

While chapter seven is an important addition that supports the author’s argumenterations, the illustrations represented there, however, are mostly in very poor condition and therefore of little value to the reader. In fact, what can the reader see/learn, for example, from the unclear illustrations, such as nos. 5–7, 8, 13 (161–63, 164, 172)? At least the frescoes from Dura Europos remained and are available mostly in good condition. They definitely could be provided in much better shape. The author who invested so much time and energy—by all means—on this book, as well as his readers who paid so much money, deserve much better qualitative visual designs than this respectful publisher provided here.

The volume generally enjoyed a good proofreading. Since the completeness belongs to the Almighty only, there are, however, some typing mistakes. Thus, the German Umlauts are missing in some words, for example: “Gunter” (ix, 13) instead of Günter; “Kirchenvatern” (201) instead of Kirchenvätern.

All in all, the Jewish-Christian dialogue must intensify its search for better understanding, mutual and respectful acceptance of Jews and Christians by each other in spite of their many differences and unique interpretation and conceptualization of the common texts. However, despite the above-mentioned criticisms this is a readable—though sometimes repetitive—book for the academic and layperson and makes a contribution to the study of Aqedah and to its Jewish-Christian mutual exegesis in the first six centuries of the Common Era.