This is an important book. Scholars of biblical studies, Jewish studies, religious studies, rabbincs, Jewish philosophy, Jewish theology, Jewish history, and Jewish-Christian relations will find it insightful and intriguing. The book comprises the proceedings of a conference at Drew University in June 1997, but it is much more than the transcript of yet another superfluous academic conference. Rather, this is a highly self-conscious attempt to address the crisis of contemporary Jewish life and change the course of Jewish studies, especially the practice of Jewish philosophy. The organizer of the Drew conference and co-editor of the book, Peter Ochs, his co-editor, Nancy Levene, and the participants in the volume all belong to the Society of Textual Reasoning, whose mission is “to seek means of repairing Jewish religion and Western ethics after the Shoah” (6).

The project of textual reasoning began in 1991 (or according to another version, in 1989 [240]), when a few members of the Academy of Jewish Philosophy—Peter Ochs, Robert Gibbs, Steven Kepnes, and Laurie Zoloth—“decided to form a new sub-group dedicated to the study of ‘postmodern Jewish philosophy’ ” (3). Originally named Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Network (POMO), the group later renamed itself Society of Textual Reasoning (TR), communicated electronically with 280 of its members, and published the online Journal of Textual Reasoning. The founders of the group, Steven Kepens, Peter Ochs, and Robert Gibbs, also published essays in Reasoning after Revelation: Dialogues
Textual Reasonings, however, claims that TR is more than a strand within Jewish philosophy. The volume presents the endeavor as a new “movement” within contemporary Judaism. The goals, methods, and import of TR are spelled out with great clarity in the introductory essay by Peter Ochs. If TR is a “movement,” then Ochs’s introductory essay is its “manifesto.” Members of TR (or “textual reasoners,” as they are called in the volume) launched their endeavor with a strong sense that they “do not belong to the reigning paradigms of Jewish academic enquiry (the Wissenschaft des Judentums and its historical-critical modes of text study, or modern liberal philosophy) nor to the methods of the various yeshivot, nor to the various forms of generic academic postmodernity (deconstruction, critical theory, liberation thought and so on)” (3–4). As an alternative to these existing paradigms of text study, TR turned to the philosophy of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Emmanuel Levinas, whose dialogic method of inquiry was best exemplified by classical rabbinic texts. The volume thus presents textual reasoning as a “new-old” way of doing Jewish philosophy as well as a distinctive way of engaging sacred texts.

Textual reasoning is philosophical because it accepts the ideal of rationality and affirms the “indispensable role of critical rationality in its teaching” (5). But textual reasoning is also critical of the privileging of “modern” or “Western” paradigms of rationality as “universal standards of reason” (5). As part of the postcolonial discourse, Textual Reasonings presents Jewish text-centered exegetical practices as “indigenous practices of text-reading [that] represent indigenous practices of reasoning” (5). In other words, according to this volume, to think Jewishly, or to do Jewish philosophy, means to think about and with received texts (whether scriptural, rabbinic, or philosophic). Out of the dialogue with a given text, with the subtexts that are alluded to or embedded in it, and with other commentators on the text emerges the truth of divine revelation. This dialogic modality indicates that revelation is not just a one-time historical event, but a continuous, ongoing process in which the human encounters the divine and truth emerges from the encounter itself.

All this is not new but an extension of Buber’s and Rosenzweig’s philosophy of dialogue. Yet for TR the dialogic understanding of revelation, and in turn of Jewish philosophy, has
a political intent: to chart the middle road between the literalist Ultra-orthodoxy, on the right, and the atheist secularism, on the left. Regarding both paradigms as harmful “dogmatism” (6), Ochs presents TR to be in continuity with modern Orthodox Judaism and in agreement with modern Liberal Judaism (5), thereby co-opting both into TR. Although no reference is made to Conservative Judaism, the movement that currently presents itself as the “middle” in contemporary Judaism, it is evident that TR is a sophisticated articulation of that posture, while challenging and critiquing Conservative Judaism. The movement and its rabbinic seminary, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, are still committed to Wissenschaft des Judentums and its historical-philological approach to past texts. In contrast, TR is deeply critical of the academic study of Judaism and its modernist, philosophical underpinnings. Since a good number of the participants in the volume were either trained in or associated with the Seminary, it is justifiable to consider the volume as an internal debate within Conservative Judaism. Only time will tell whether TR will capture the imagination of Jews and will regenerate Judaism, as this volume imagines and hopes. For now TR remains no more and no less than an academic discourse within Jewish studies, notwithstanding its broad social ambitions.

The structure of Textual Reasonings illustrates the commitment to dialogue as a mode of inquiry. In part 1, chapters 1–3 include a major paper and two responses. In chapter 4, the dialogue takes a different format as Peter Ochs summarizes the work of David Weiss Halivni and Halivni delivers his response. Part 2 includes two chapters of reflections about the project of TR. In chapter 5 a group of Jewish philosophers reflect about TR and respond to individual papers in part 1, and chapter 6 consists of reflections by Christian observers on the relevance of TR to Christians. While biblical scholars would probably find part 1 most pertinent to their endeavor, the full meaning of the volume and the significance of TR emerge only when the volume is read in its totality.

Chapter 1 illustrates one aspect of Jewish textual reasoning: the “hermeneutics of retrieval.” Michael Fishbane focuses his attention on the rabbinic text Song of Songs Rabbah. Fishbane’s sensitive close reading of the text is Jewish scriptural theology par excellence. By listening to the silences, gaps, and overtones of the biblical text and by analyzing the editorial decisions responsible for the structure of the anthology, Fishbane shows how this midrashic collection manifests “an “emergent theology of divine logos,’’ in which “God’s Oral Words become or are transformed into The Written Words of revelation” (35). This is not merely an assertion “that the entire of Tradition is prefigured (or encoded) within the words of the Decalogue” but a claim about “the continuous revelation of rabbinic culture through scriptural interpretation” (35). Fishbane’s unpacking of the lemma: “O let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Song 1:2) shows how “the divine kisses at Sinai are transfigured into the human desire
for Torah . . . through interpretation” (39). The Songs of Songs Rabbah, then, is not a haphazard anthology of diverse rabbinic readings of biblical text but a consistent vision about the spiritual meaning of Torah study: spiritual perfection consists of the ongoing “yearning for God through study” (39). That theme guides the editing of the collection and transforms Torah study into an erotic endeavor.

Whereas Fishbane highlights the internal unity of Song of Songs Rabbah, his first respondent, Steven Fraade, emphasizes “the unresolved dialectic of intimacy and intermediacy in Israel’s relationship to God. Israel desires, and is privileged with, the ‘mouth to mouth’ intimacy of God’s revelatory kiss, yet also, in fear of the potency of such unmediated divine contact, prefers to receive revelation via an intermediary agent” (53). More importantly, whereas Fishbane imagines the synagogue as the “natural setting” for the interpretative activity, Fraade believes it was the rabbinic academic in which “rabbis faced each other in study and debate” that was the social context of rabbinic exegesis. Whatever the location of rabbinic activity was, neither Fraade nor Fishbane reflect on the similarity and differences between rabbinic Torah study and the pursuit of wisdom and perfection, that is, philosophy, in Greco-Roman philosophical schools. Such a comparison is very pertinent to the project of TR, even though it might have shed a different light on the philosophic quality of midrashic reasoning. In antiquity there was a radical separation between rhetoric and logic, and philosophy was understood both narrowly, that is, a demonstrative, syllogistic procedure, as well as broadly, that is, as a way of life that translated theoria into praxis. Structurally the rabbis were organized like a philosophical school and could be considered philosophers in the broad sense of the term, devoting their life to the pursuit of wisdom. Torah, in other words, is the sophia of the Jews. However, midrashic discourse was rhetorical rather than strictly speaking philosophical, and rhetoric was the tool of lawyers and politicians, which is precisely how the rabbis functioned in Jewish society. That TR glorifies rabbinic reasoning may indicate the triumph of rhetoric over logic within Jewish philosophy, a change that comes at a high price.

Perhaps to counter this potential objection, the second response by Steven Kepnes spells out the extent to which rabbinic discourse in Song of Songs Rabbah is philosophical. Kepnes claims that the anthology attempted to address a philosophical problem: the relationship between body and soul. Thus the text under consideration is not an attempt to articulate “the ontology of speech at Sinai,” as Fishbane put it (35), but a claim that “human desire is . . . fulfilled in its sublimation and elevation into desire for Torah knowledge” (61). In Kepnes’s reading “Torah thus becomes the ‘subtle body’ between the purely physical and the purely spiritual realms that Israel must learn to love” (61), and “Torah study is a spiritual discipline designed to prepare the scholar’s body and mind and soul for a spiritual ecstasy of contact with the divine” (63). These ideas have pragmatic
consequences because they offer a “healing” (*tikkun*) to a perceived suffering or an ethical dilemma.

The claim that textual reasoning has healing power is quite problematic. While the intent is noble and admirable, it is appropriate to ask: How can textual interpretation heal the world? Exegetical practices indeed shape people’s attitudes and perceptions and in this regard may affect social conduct, social institutions, and social policies. Interpretative practices and their conclusion can also impact relations with other textual communities, especially with those that read the same texts, as Judaism and Christianity do. But Kepnes and other participants in the volume seem to say that by simply engaging in hermeneutics human suffering is alleviated. This, I contend, reflects the impact of kabbalah on TR, even though the magical and theurgic assumptions of kabbalistic textual interpretation stand in conflict with TR’s rationalist stance. Real suffering generated by poverty, injustice, political conflicts, wars, sickness, and environmental degradation cannot be alleviated by textual interpretation. Furthermore, the procedure of textual reasoning does not necessarily yield what TR considers a desired result—for example, pluralism, tolerance to difference, and humane treatment of the other—but may also yield rigidity, oppression, and intolerance. In other words, while interpretative procedures can shape attitudes and actions, thereby changing social reality, it is important to recognize the limits of hermeneutical activity and not present it as *tikkun olam* too cavalierly, as is the fashion today.

In chapter 2, we move from hermeneutics of retrieval to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Another well-known biblical scholar, Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, presents a feminist critique of four biblical texts: Exod19; Num 25; 1 Kgs: 22; and Ezek 20. Reiterating well-known feminist charges, Frymer-Kensky’s reading of Exod19 highlights Moses’ “myopia, his inability to see women, which makes him look at the people and address only men” (71). Feminists have well documented that “Moses’ exclusion of the women from the women of Israel continued to have its effect in Jewish tradition,” but Frymer-Kensky goes further to show that it is Moses, rather than God, who introduced “the whole antipodal relationship between sexuality and spirituality” (71). In her analysis of Num 25, Frymer-Kensky boldly argues that “Moses totally changes God’s message” in the sins of Baal Peor. Whereas God speaks about collective punishment, Moses “envisions individual retribution.” Frymer-Kensky goes on to argue that the Bible itself encompasses skepticism about the “word of God” (74), a charge illustrated, albeit without sufficient development, by looking at 1 Kgs 22, where “the revelation of God is sometimes a lie . . . and there is no way to know if the particular word of God you hear is what you should really believe” (74). Ezekiel 20 is yet another example in which the diatribe against the “false prophets” illustrates the biblical “indeterminacy of trust.”
The hermeneutics of suspicion raises theological challenges to contemporary Jewish women and requires creative theological response. Without a theoretical conclusion, the essay does not spell out either the problems or the solutions but only alludes to the Jewish feminist theologian, Judith Plaskow. More challenging to the project of TR is the obvious tension between Fishbane’s hermeneutics of retrieval and Frymer-Kensky’s hermeneutics of suspicion. The issue is directly addressed in the introductory essay of Ochs. The very fact that one would regard the two procedures as “either-or” indicates a commitment to the obsolete, binary logic of modernity. Instead, Ochs argues that textual reasoners endorse the logic of “both-and” that enables them to tolerate different hermeneutical strategies so as to become “a community of dialogue-in-difference.” In a separate study Ochs has turned to the pragmatism of Charles Sander Peirce to provide the philosophical justification for the desired “triadic logic.” A brief allusion to it in the introductory essay resolves the apparent tension by saying that the two hermeneutical strategies are governed by “a rule of relation, R, that cannot be represented by any single principle, P” (11). Presumably this logic can tolerate diverse and even conflicting strategies of interpretation without privileging one over the other. The result is that the discourse of TR is necessarily multivocal, ambiguous, and open-ended; problems are stated and encountered but are not resolved; they are deferred to future solutions that might emerge in the hermeneutical process itself.

The first respondent to Frymer-Kensky, Virginia Burrus, largely endorses Frymer-Kensky’s approach but looks at the passages chosen by her from a Christian perspective in an attempt to understand the difference between Jewish and Christian interpretative traditions. According to Burrus, whereas Christian reading practices attempted “to revoice the divine Logos in its oneness, to separate the straight way of ‘orthodoxy’ from the divergent voices of ‘heresy,’ ” the ancient rabbis tended “to renounce or to defer resolution or synthesis by not only layering but also multiplying possible reading, a process that took explicit dialogic form which textualized, sustaining the free play of exchanges of meanings” (77–78). Burrus then illustrates the point by juxtaposing the rabbinic reading of the disturbing texts adduced by Frymer-Kensky, to the reading of these texts by Gregory of Nyssa. Burrus does not explain why the Christians were seeking “a transcendent Logos within or behind scriptures” (79), while for the rabbis “the text itself is always already a body of ‘interpretation’ birthing multiple other bodies of ‘interpretation’ ” (79). Was this difference caused by the fact that Christian church fathers were pagans trained in Greek philosophy, whereas the rabbis either lacked such training or consciously rejected it? Again, the philosophical and historical significance of Burrus’s claims remain unexplored.

The second respondent to Frymer-Kensky, Aryeh Cohen, makes clear the radical potential of TR. Endorsing Frymer-Kensky’s hermeneutics of suspicious wholeheartedly,
Cohen argues that the rabbis were profoundly committed to “the essential unknowability of the word of God” (88). Representing Moses in their own image, the rabbis portrayed him as “the paradigmatic midrashist” who is engaged in the act of rereading. Examining the rabbinic treatments of the same troubling texts adduced by Frymer-Kensky, Cohen shows how they presented Moses as a mediator who is in “collusion with God.” The rabbis themselves, then, were practicing the hermeneutics of suspicion! Cohen calls on Jews “to embrace the queer performance of midrashic textuality and challenge the phallomorphic symbolic economy that informs its legal world” (88). This is to say, Judaism’s legal traditions have to be challenged from within by using the rabbis’ own subversive logic, a point already argued by Menachem Fisch in *Rational Rabbis: Science and Talmudic Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). Although Cohen does not say so explicitly, his essay intimates that oppression and injustice within Judaism (for example, the treatment of women and gays) could be alleviated only by heeding his call. Since Cohen teaches at the University of Judaism, where future rabbis are trained, his textual reasoning can have pragmatic consequences, though some Jews may find them problematic.

If chapters 1 and 2 of *Textual Reasonings* take Scripture as their point of departure and focus on the nonlegal material in the rabbinic corpus, chapters 3 and 4 focus on talmudic legal reasoning in an attempt to show that it is philosophical. Chapter 3 presents a joint paper by Robert Gibbs and Peter Ochs, the leaders of TR. Analyzing *b. Baba Meši’a* 44b, devoted to the closure of sales, Gibbs and Ochs argue that the text raises philosophical questions about the relationship between signs and objects and the translation from one sign to another. Through four levels of interpretation, “classification, reference, argument, and finally teaching logic” (101), the talmudic passage first “assigns meaning to things” and “attempts to make signs have their meaning by a gold standard—by understanding some sign as the real anchor for all signs” (101). Second, the passage “discovers that meaning arises in the naming of things and discovers different domains of naming” (102). Third, “on the context of signification, the sign depends on traditions and communities of interpreters,” which leads finally to offer a certain “pragmatics” (i.e., “action”) that “provides a model for postmodern logic” (102).

Despite the originality of this essay, it is not without problems, and they are spotted most astutely by the response of Shaul Magid, who, along with Aryeh Cohen, is the editor of the e-journal of TR. Magid first notes that Gibbs and Ochs make too facile a move from monetary values of things discussed by the talmudic text to the values of verbal signs (106). Magid insightfully reminds the readers of the fact “that midrashic thinking . . . has no systematic logic in any philosophical sense” so that when Gibbs and Ochs characterize their reading as “philosophical Talmud,” “we learn more about how they understand the term ‘philosophy’ than what is philosophical about the Talmudic discourse itself” (106).
Second, Magid questions the lack of historical contextualization in Gibbs and Ochs’s analysis of talmudic legal reasoning. After the defeat of Bar Kokhba rebellion in 135 C.E. the rabbis were fully aware of their own political powerlessness either vis-à-vis the Romans or within the Jewish community. Hence, an absolutist appeal to either messianism or to Sinaitic revelation had to fail. It was this awareness and the relativistic nature of their reality that led the rabbis to allow for multiplicity of voices and indeterminacy in their deliberations. The rabbis knew that “the reconstruction of their society had to reflect and not oppose the relativistic society they now lived in” (108).

Third, Magid suggests that the similarity between the rabbis and postmodern textual reasoning lies in the reality of exile: “exile from God, from a promise of economic stability, or from reason as an absolute standard of truth” (111).

To these valid points, I wish to add three comments. First, throughout Gibbs and Ochs’s essay (and indeed in the entire volume) there is no consideration of the rabbinic theory of language, especially the Hebrew language, the divine language by which God created the world. That theory is particularly crucial in the visionary and mystical dimension of rabbinic Judaism, the tradition known as Hekhalot and Merkabah literature, which would later be incorporated into medieval kabbalah. For whatever reason, kabbalistic textual interpretations are not discussed in this volume, even though TR is deeply influenced by them, to the detriment of the volume. Second, Gibbs and Ochs promote textual reasoning as a critique of “binary,” “dichotomous,” “absolute,” “imperialistic,” “exclusive,” “oppressive,” and “dogmatic” practices. These are the “sins” of modernity and the Enlightenment project, which only textual reasoning can presumably “expiate” because of its “triadic logic.” As a result, Judaism in general and Jewish philosophy in particular should be understood as “pluralistic,” “ambiguous,” “pragmatic,” “relational,” “intertextual,” and “communal.” While one can appreciate the power of dialogic mode of inquiry and endorse the claim that truth emerges relationally and that meaning requires communal practices of interpretation, is not the distinction between “good” and “bad” logic itself an exercise in binary thinking? Is not the claim that philosophy must not aspire to clarity, argumentation, and systematization but should cherish instead ambiguity, messiness, multivocality, creativity, improvisation, and imaginativeness itself dogmatic and exclusionary? Finally, the antifoundationalism of Gibbs and Ochs (clarified in Gibbs’s response to Magid) has much more in common with Maimonides’ negative theology and agnosticism than with rabbinic rhetoric. Remarkably, the volume includes no discussion of medieval biblical philosophical commentaries, either because members of TR have not yet extended their analysis to this genre or because the rationalism of the medieval philosophers is perceived to be too close to the modernism that TR seeks to undermine.
In chapter 4, the political import of TR becomes most obvious as Peter Ochs engages the work of David Weiss Halivni, claiming that “Halivni’s pragmatic historiography is most appropriately categorized as a species of textual reasoning” (121), even though his extensive research in rabbinics had been done long before TR came into existence. The “recruitment” of Halivni to TR indicates the attempt of TR to present itself as a “movement” in contemporary Judaism that debunks two wrong ways of linear thinking: Orthodoxy and secularism, “who treat their source texts as if we knew now precisely what God wants” (121). Ochs argues that “for Halivni, the logic that ultra-Orthodox and secular thinking share in common threatens the health and survival of religious Judaism in these tender years of its recovery after the Shoah” (121). Based on the “law of the excluded middle,” such linear thinking caused the crisis of faith that Jews experience today that could be healed only if Jews adopt the pragmatic talmudic scholarship of Halivni and its “hermeneutical resolution.” Halivni does not object to being labeled a “textual reasoner” and generally accepts Ochs’s analysis of his work, but there is no indication that Halivni cares about the philosophical categories that inform TR, be they Peirce’s pragmatism or postmodern Continental philosophy. Instead, Halivni is concerned with giving meaning to his own “religious sensibility” (147), and his decade-long research in talmudic sources and traditions is motivated by his own critique of Conservative Judaism.

If part I shows how textual reasoning works, part 2 presents two sets of reflections about TR: one by Jewish philosophers (ch. 5) and the other by Christian theologians (ch. 6). The essays in part 2 are introduced by Nancy Levene’s introductory essay, placed at the head of the volume. She appropriately characterizes the endeavor of TR as “a desire to ‘return’ to tradition, albeit a tradition filtered through the sieve of contemporary theological concerns and a corresponding suspicion of modernity and its philosophical discourses” (15). Levene sheds light on TR’s critique of modernity and its ideals “human perfectibility, predictability, rationality and autonomy” and asserts that the challenge for postmodern philosophy is “to reconceive the very notion of rationality … and to reimagine human subjectivity as inextricably bound by historical and cultural context” (18). TR has clearly risen to the challenge spelled out by Levene’s introduction. The essays in part 2 illustrate how the dialogue-in-difference can be conducted “in a spirit of conversation and friendship” (23), whether a dialogue with TR as a group (Eugene Borowitz), a dialogue with a rabbinic text (Zachary Breiterman), a dialogue between textual reasoners (Jacob Meskin and Martin Kavka), a dialogue with other philosophical and theological texts (Randi Rashkover), or a dialogue with medical texts and letters (Laurie Zoloth and Michael Zank). Through these conversations various philosophical, theological, and ethical issues are explored and the project as a whole becomes clearer.
With the exception of the essay by Borowitz, a senior theologian of Reform Judaism, the essays in chapter 5 are written by relatively young scholars of Jewish philosophy, making clear that TR manifests a certain generational shift within the discipline. Instead of the emphasis on the history of philosophy, the attention to medieval Jewish philosophy, and the indebtedness to Kantianism, Hegelianism, and the Anglo-American Analytic tradition, the younger scholars have relative little interest in the history of philosophy and are indebted to postmodern Continental philosophers such as François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas in France and Levinas’s German teachers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and their Jewish contemporary, Franz Rosenzweig. These Continental philosophers, along with German philosopher and literary theorist Hans George Gadamer and German Protestant theologian Karl Barth, function as philosophical “authorities” for the Jewish philosophers who define themselves as “textual reasoners.” With this shift to Continental philosophy came also the intentional blurring of academic disciplinary boundaries and the impact of disciplines such as critical theory, comparative literature, cultural studies, art history, and anthropology on the practice of Jewish philosophy. All this does not a movement make, but it does indicate a change in direction in the practice of Jewish philosophy.

Borowitz reflects on the differences between textual reasoning and the philosophic commitment to generalization and abstract thinking. While he does not mind being labeled a “textual reasoner” and acknowledges similarities between textual reasoning and philosophy, he also reminds the group that “the more texts one wishes to generalize about, the greater the distance between the texts and the reasoning” (159). Like Magid, Borowitz admits that “classic Jewish texts resolutely resist generalization” (159) and that for this reason there remains a gap between the interests of philosophers and the concerns of textual scholars. Borowitz also considers TR as a whole to be deeply indebted to Franz Rosenzweig, “who was much more reliant on philosophy than appears warranted to many religious thinkers today” (160). This point is well taken, given the centrality of Rosenzweig to TR.

Two papers in chapter 5 discuss Rosenzweig’s legacy in some detail. Rashkover argues that Rosenzweig’s philosophy of Judaism (like Karl Barth’s theology) was not just dialogical but also dialectical. In Rosenzweig’s Star of Redemption, “dialogue does not afford direct knowledge of God’s being but only dialectically point to the transcendent” (200). Therefore, the names of God or the stories about God in the Torah are not “literal references to the divine or the eternal [but] metaphorical and cognitive aids, like Kant’s regulative ideas, postulated in order to help make moral experience meaningful” (200). Rashkover explains how this view of Torah undergirds Rosenzweig’s conception of ritual, a communal practice that begins with words and ends with silence. Rosenzweig, of course, was instrumental to the revival of Jewish life in interwar Germany, and his
famous Lehrhaus was a community of adult Jewish learners that functions as the model for TR. Zank provides a first English translation of Rosenzweig’s letter to Edward Strauss (a nonacademic, brilliant teacher of Bible who was associated with the Lehrhaus) and offers an insightful comparison between the German case in post–World War I and the virtual conversation of TR at the end of the twentieth century. Electronic communication is especially suitable for the direct, spontaneous, creative, improvisational and communal dimensions of TR, but it is not clear that it can accomplish what Rosenzweig’s Lehrhaus aspired to: the character formation of Jews (Bildung). The “community” of TR consists predominantly of Jewish academics who communicate among themselves, using technical academic vocabulary that is practically incomprehensible to ordinary Jews.

The pragmatic implications of TR are engaged by Zoloth from the perspective of a different communal practice: the pediatric hospital. Looking at various case reports, Zoloth illustrates how these texts (which are neither religious nor philosophical) raise ethical dilemmas that can be addressed through the procedure adopted by textual reasoning. Exceptionally critical of modernity (and its application to medical practice), Zoloth embraces postmodern sensibility because of its intimacy and because it offers a way to deal with acute bioethical issues that arise from competing interpretative assumptions. If Jewish philosophy is to join the “discourse on justice,” Zoloth implies, it must not follow abstract rules but adopt postmodern textual practices. If Zoloth extends the boundaries of Jewish philosophical texts to include medical reports, Breiterman extends its boundaries by highlighting the cultural moment in which we find ourselves in the beginning of the twenty-first century: “a culture enmeshed within the material, technological, market and media culture surrounding us now” (212).

TR’s preoccupation with texts raises challenging questions about history, the academic discipline that nineteenth-century Jewish scholars adopted as a pathway to truth. Textual reasoners clearly reject the attempt to recover the past “as it truly was.” The dialogue between Meskin and Kavka crystallizes the relationship between history and textual reasoning. Meskin reflects on a telling anecdote about the resistance of a biblical scholar committed to the Documentary Hypothesis to textual reasoning represented by the work of Daniel Boyarin. Meskin acknowledges that textual reasoning breaks with the notion that history “reveals the ‘bottom line’ about a text” (169) but argues that doing so “is not a negation of history—it is, rather, the search for an alternative dimension (or level of meaning) that would coexist alongside the dimension of history, without being reducible to it” (169). Meskin suggests that modernity itself is founded on a historical worldview that “deprives any group of the power to control the past, exposing the objective data of earlier times to public scrutiny and scientific analysis” (169). With a more subtle understanding of modernity, some of the critique of Wissenschaft des Judentums voiced by TR could be toned down.
In response, Kavka introduces the distinction between history and memory, which received a lot of attention in Jewish circles after the publication of Hayyim Yosef Yerushalmi’s *Zachor*. According to Kavka, Meskin presents TR as a movement that “seeks to replace the concept of history with another concept to which it has recently been opposed—memory.” (175). Looking at various theorists of memory, Kavka wishes to change how TR should understand itself, shifting the focus from “what texts mean” and “how they mean” to “the fact that that texts mean anything at all” (179) through the communal practice of interpretation. As Bernard M. Levinson has shown, the Jewish myth (or Jewish collective memory) has itself emerged through the radical act of constructive interpretation that created room for dissident and even heterodox views within the tradition. In Judaism, claims Kavka, contrary to most traditional interpreters, revelation is always “revelation-to-me,” a point he illustrates by looking at *Pesiqta Rabbati* 24. For Kavka, to interpret revealed texts means always to “insert ourselves into the primal flow of history in which God acts” (183). Kavka’s concluding statement can serve as the message of TR to readers of the *Review of Biblical Literature*:

what is key in reading Torah is not the goal of unveiling the essence of revelation, but rather rooting our autonomous interests and decision-making processes in the revealed texts, thereby revealing that our autonomy is not a rejection of the heteronomy of covenantal stipulations of Torah, but rather an *expression* of them. The expression of our individual needs to find our own theological stances in the tradition is thus an expression what we perceive to be the needs of the community, and is rooted in our responsibility to redeem it. (p. 185)

Precisely because the Bible is the foundation of another interpretative tradition—Christianity—the organizers of the Drew conference did well by inviting three Christian theologians to observe the conference and respond to its procedures from a Christian perspective. To George Lindbeck, the conference at Drew raises interesting analogies with Vatican II, since the long deliberations of Catholic bishops were very similar to the communal interpretative practices of TR. Churches today, however, lost long ago the ability to engage in textual reasoning and to benefit from its reparative power. Textual reasoning, Lindbeck suggests, may enable Christianity to avoid the fissure between ossified traditional and total disregard to the tradition. In agreement with this claim David Ford spells out what Christians can learn from observing the intensive reading of texts by Jewish scholars and philosophers. Learning from Jews, Christians can develop the social setting of joint study of texts in religious community and transform as well the practice of the university. The volume concludes with Daniel Hardy’s summary how meaning emerges through interpretation and why TR is a refreshing departure from and critique of the “atomization and self-isolation that are endemic to the academy” (294).
endorses the project and optimistically points to the possible changes in Jewish-Christian relations, if both groups adopt the method and spirit of textual reasoning.

In conclusion, *Textual Reasonings* is a book to reckon with because it engages theological, philosophical, and ethical dimensions of the interpretation of sacred texts. While the procedure of textual reasoning may fail to produce a “movement” in contemporary Judaism or to heal the conflict-ridden legacy of modernity, it does offer a creative and thoughtful way of addressing the perplexity of contemporary Jews. The challenge to TR is to remember that no matter how important texts are to Jewish communal life, reality is not textual; there is a world outside the text, notwithstanding the claims of postmodern philosophy.