

Yes, stereotypes are categorizations that simplify our understanding of the world. Yet, our world (and the ancient world) is complex and often ambiguous. In her article “The Slippery Yet Tenacious Nature of Racism,” Susannah Heschel reminds us that in the study of religion it is necessary to unveil how race is hidden or perhaps overlooked. She argues, “As society recognizes the horrors of racism—in slavery, Jim Crow, and genocide—shame often suppresses forthright declarations and instead creates ‘hidden’ institutions of racism, or racist ideas in different language.”<sup>7</sup> She concludes that racism requires “constant questioning.” This cautionary tale should be a consideration as we read, interpret, and teach sacred texts. We should constantly question and be mindful of how we, too, can reinscribe the very racism that we are seeking to eradicate (if that, indeed, is what we are seeking to do).

Many Christians today feel that the term “Christian” has been usurped. They do not identify with others who boldly proclaim their beliefs and ideals are Christianity’s “right and true” form. There is dissonance, but there is also resonance. The Jesus movement that developed within and later morphed outside of Judaism was Judaism until it was not. In the United States, ideological divides in our contemporary moment are often condensed to “us versus them” rhetoric. This rhetoric has far too often resulted in extreme violence. The lessons from how to better understand the Pharisees abound, and perhaps a lesson for how we can better understand ourselves can come from how we understand Pharisees. Maybe we can learn to be more hospitable to our religious others, our racial and ethnic others, our gendered others when we acknowledge what we do not know—when we mind the gap.

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#### IV

The present volume represents the cornucopian product of Amy-Jill Levine, formerly of Vanderbilt University and now at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, and Joseph Sievers, of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, whose individual efforts in promoting collaboration, one notably in print volumes and one notably by convening conferences, have provided contemporary scholars with a trove of high-level reflection on a

<sup>7</sup> Susannah Heschel, “The Slippery Yet Tenacious Nature of Racism: New Developments in Critical Race Theory and Their Implications for the Study of Religion and Ethics,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35 (January 2015):1, 23.

variety of academic issues of significant interest to scholars of Second Temple Judaism. *The Pharisees* is a volume of essays emerging from the conference “Jesus and the Pharisees: An Interdisciplinary Reappraisal,” organized primarily by Professor Sievers and edited into a highly readable collection of essays by Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine, a conference participant. The editors have taken great care in the organization and presentation of these papers, and the volume reads much more like an engaging textbook than like conference proceedings. Much more. *The Pharisees* is divided into three parts, but somewhat less equally than Caesar’s Gaul. The first two sections, “Historical Reconstruction” and “Reception History,” are roughly equal in both length and breadth, each comprising a dozen or so academic essays by the most prominent scholars in the subjects essayed. These are preceded by a prelude, a summary article on the various and revealing ways scholars have approached the word “Pharisees,” a word that ancient witnesses had little problem with, but which has confounded modern scholars. Why this article is prefatory the editors fail to explain, but second-guessing the editors’ decision to place the essay outside of their division of the rest of the scholarly contributions into historical and ideological categories is not particularly difficult. The article certainly bears both on questions of historical reconstruction and reception history, inasmuch as how scholars have understood even the etymology of “Pharisees” is strongly influenced by both their latent and their expressed attitude toward Pharisaism. But almost all of the historical articles, certainly the one I have chosen to deal with here, connect the text with its reception, and the article could as easily have been placed as the header to the historical section.

The historical section of *The Pharisees* represents the most sophisticated scholarship yet accumulated in print about that subject, approached by senior scholars in the fields that they have cultivated as their own. But like all ancient texts in which Pharisees appear, these papers cannot or should not be approached without context. The conference from which the present volume proceeds occurred in the aftermath of some well-publicized remarks of Pope Francis,<sup>8</sup> as well as the antecedent to others, remarks that led to the suspicion that the Holy Father is not immune to the scriptural and post-scriptural calumny that the Pharisees were hypocritical legalists,<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, *Pharisees of today*, October 19, 2017, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2017/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie\\_20171019\\_pharisees-of-today.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2017/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20171019_pharisees-of-today.html).

<sup>9</sup> In their preface, the editors note that the idea for the conference emerged from a suggestion made by David Rosen to Joseph Sievers in spring 2017, some months before Francis’ negative remarks about Pharisees.

irrespective of Jesus' demand that his followers need to observe Pharisaic teachings to the letter (Matt 23:3). Francis presented his own remarks (free from any anti-Pharisaism) to the conference conveners and attendees in a special audience, in which he portrays the Pharisees as a group with whom Jesus had "numerous discussions ... about common concerns," a statement simultaneously obvious and radical (442). The Holy Father's conference remarks close the volume. Whether he can rid himself of the stereotypical identification of Pharisees with legalistic hypocrites remains to be seen and remains to be seen by Vatican-watchers far keener than this writer. The conference and this attendant volume served to present the best in contemporary scholarship about the Pharisees to Pope Francis, and certainly accomplished that goal, but the context in which they were offered cannot be ignored.

My own involvement with the Pharisees is similar to that of many of the scholars represented in this volume, who have noted the places where that group crossed paths with the authors, communities, and movements they have chosen to study. Those fields for me have been the ways in which some of the New Testament authors have chosen to represent Judaism, whether in their own lives and teaching or in the life and teaching of Jesus, or in the experience of the early church and the early churches. It will surprise no one reading this that Pharisees and Pharisaism inevitably intersect with the concerns of these New Testament authors, with Paul, the earliest datable source for *pharisaios* (Phil 3:5; [and perhaps in Acts 23:6 and 26:5?]), with Mark, who portrays Jesus as a Sadducee in dialogue with Pharisees<sup>10</sup> and as a Pharisee in dialogue with Sadducees,<sup>11</sup> with Matthew, where Jesus requires his students to follow Pharisaism but not Pharisees, and with Acts, where Pharisees appear in connection with the necessity for male believers to be circumcised if they wanted to join the Way (Acts 15:5), with the composition of the Sanhedrin itself (Acts 5:34 and 23:6-9), and in Paul's defense before that body (Acts 26:5). In almost every case, the New Testament authors explain to their (mainly non-Jewish?) readers who the Pharisees are, even if their explanations fail to satisfy modern scholars very thoroughly.

<sup>10</sup> As in the discussion of hand-washing before eating, Mark 7:1-23.

<sup>11</sup> As in the discussion about resurrection, Mark 12:18-27. Cf. Peter S. Zaas, "Every Signal Worth Reading': Jews and Jewish Sectarians in Mark," in *Reading Religions in the Ancient World: Essays Presented to Robert McQueen Grant on His 90th Birthday*, ed. David Edward Aune and Robin Darling Young (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 141-47. Peter Zaas, "Jesus as Sadducee and Pharisee: Teaching the Teacher in the Gospel of Mark," in *Teaching the Historical Jesus*, ed. Zev Garber (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 231-41.

The intersection of the Pharisees with the study of the New Testament is the primary focus of seven of the thirteen essays in the “Historical Reconstruction” section of this volume. Each of these essays places the author’s conclusions within the spectrum of responsible scholarship, and each of them presents a clear, if not definitive, conclusion, characteristics of the well-edited volumes we expect from these authors and these editors. Nor do the contributors to the historical section of this volume avoid the fraught context for the reconstruction of the historical Pharisees, in almost every case setting their scholarship in the context of millennia of anti-Pharisaism. I focus here on Paula Fredriksen’s excellent “Paul, the Perfectly-Righteous Pharisee,” where the author conscientiously tries to track backward over centuries of ideological interpretation of the Pharisees, almost all of it negative.

Professor Fredriksen, in the volume’s only essay specifically devoted to Paul (the earliest known user of the word “Pharisee” and the only self-identified Pharisee at all), sets out to determine “How much ... can Paul help us when we try to reconstruct relations between Jesus of Nazareth and his Pharisaic contemporaries and to identify those issues that both united and divided them?” (112). This is an ambitious goal given that while Paul (once, at Phil 3:5) identifies himself as a “Pharisee, according to the Torah,” he reveals almost no biographical information at all about Jesus beyond a small and well-known handful of items: his account of Jesus’ words at the Last Supper, Jesus’ opposition to divorce, his crucifixion and resurrection, and a couple of other, disputed, bits of biographical information about Jesus. These tidbits might be vitally important, in, for instance, recovering the liturgy of Jesus’ first followers, but are of little help, as Fredriksen notes, in teasing out Jesus’ relationship with other Jewish groups.

Responsible historical research is a data-driven enterprise, and responsible historical research about such questions as how to position Jesus vis-à-vis the Pharisees with whom the gospels portray him as debating are questions that can only be answered by analyzing the available data, data that as for most questions of New Testament history, are very sparse. In a tour de force of brief summary, Fredriksen surveys the difficulties in both locating the data and interpreting them (113). To summarize her summary, the author notes that although scholars agree generally on where they can locate data (the New Testament, Josephus, some [unspecified] early rabbinic texts), how to read the data remains contentious. Presumably Fredriksen means that when the texts mention Pharisees, they mean Pharisees, but when they mention other groups who might be Pharisees, like the *dorshei hachalakot* of the Nahum Peshet, they might not mean Pharisees. She notes the multifold ambiguities involved in rabbinic references to *Perushim*

or *Haverim* and the potential biases in descriptions of Pharisees in Josephus and Acts. She notes as well that the bias of the gospels, at least the bias writ large (for Jesus and against Pharisees), is well established, but a method of using these biased descriptions is scarcely established at all.

Fredriksen offers her own reading of these contested sources, surveying the evidence first from Josephus and then from the gospels and Acts. For her, Josephus' description of the characteristic teachings of the Pharisees, "Halakic precision ... theology, theodicy, ethics and (perhaps) soteriology" (121) at least places them in the same theological universe as Paul, whether Josephus' descriptions are tainted by bias or not. Having surveyed the non-Pauline New Testament sources and Josephus, Fredriksen turns to her main subject, Paul, with a goal, not so much to determine how much the Pauline texts can help to limn Jesus' relationship with Pharisees, but to determine Paul's own relationship with the group of which he was a self-identified member. To accomplish this goal, she offers an exegesis of two (but only two, of the half-dozen or so) autobiographical passages in Paul, "miniature self-portraits" as she aptly calls them (126): Gal 1:13-17 and Phil 3:2-9.

Both of these passages deal with Paul's "life in Judaism" (Gal 1:13) or Paul's reasons for "confidence in the flesh" (Phil 3:4), and, explicitly or arguably, both connect to Pharisees, explicitly in Philippians 3:5, arguably in Galatians 1:14, where Paul uses the phrase *tōn patrikōn ... paradoseōn*, where it may be a variation of the phrase *paradosis tōn paterōn* as in Josephus' *Antiquities* 13.297 (121). The difficult term in Galatians 1:13 and 14, though, is *ioudaïsmos*, whose difficulty is (for me) not so much its unconscious evocation of "Christianity," as Fredriksen has it (127), as the extreme rarity of the term, which occurs in the Greek Bible only in 2 Maccabees, for which book it was coined, and in 4 Maccabees 4:26, and in the New Testament, remarkably, only in these two verses in Galatians. If we claim to know what the term means, we are inevitably translating a later concept to an earlier one, a dubious process for anyone who wants to understand the text.

Fredriksen pushes hard on Paul's statement in Philippians 3:6 that as far as the apostle's former life in *ioudaïsmos* is concerned, he has been *amemptos* so far as "his law righteousness" ("living according to the Torah") is concerned (131). For Fredriksen, *amemptos* means "perfect" (131), and, for her, Paul's statement about his fulfillment of the requirements of the Torah of the God of Israel cannot be reconciled with his frustration over "the one who calls himself a Jew" being unable to fulfill the same requirements (Romans 7:7-13). Paul has previously used *amemptos* in Philippians 2:15, where Paul hopes that they might be blameless, a usage similar to his other uses of the term, in 1Thessalonians 2:10 and 3:13 where the term again describes his audience.

Although her interpretation allows her the vivid title for the essay, Paul was a blameless Pharisee, not a perfect one, if Pharisee he was.

In her blowing away a great deal of the dusty accretions of post-Pauline pro-Pauline Christian exegesis, which made Paul a model Christian and no kind of Jew, Fredriksen, in her essay for *The Pharisees*, continues the life-project represented by a stack of books and a thumb-drive of other scholarly papers. She succeeds here in uncovering the essentials of the Pauline text. In her reasking the question “What made Paul a Pharisee?,” she has walked back along a familiar path, to discover wrong turnings and right, and it has been a pleasure to walk along with her. Her essay is only one of the gems of this magnificent collection.

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### **An Appreciative Response**

As the editors of *The Pharisees*, we appreciate the careful reading and helpful observations made by the participants in this symposium. We also appreciate the opportunity to continue the conversation. The following brief comments address the articles in order.

Robert Cathey begins with a citation of Sydney Carter’s 1963 hymn, “Lord of the Dance,” which one of us discussed already in 2007.<sup>12</sup> The song, set to an adaptation of the Shaker tune “Simple Gifts,” was not intended to sound “anti-Jewish,” but that is the impression it leaves. The song thus serves as an excellent introduction to approaching the Pharisees in the gospel texts: we doubt that Matthew “intended” to write words that would inculcate or reinforce antisemitic views, but the meaning of the text always outstrips the authorial intent; we also think that most Christians who have sung this very popular hymn do not realize its anti-Jewish implications. Neither did most white people who, until about twenty years ago, sang “My Old Kentucky Home” or “Dixie” realize the inculcation or reinforcement of racist views.

<sup>12</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 221. In September 2020, the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published “Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church: An Aid for Evaluating Hymn Lyrics,” which cites the third verse of “Lord of the Dance” as an example of how “Application of the Guidelines here will rule out hymn verses that imply that the Jews as a people are collectively responsible for the death of Christ” (6).