

REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

The Pharisees. Edited by Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021. 506 pages. \$54.99.
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FOUR PERSPECTIVES

I

I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee, but
they would not dance and they would not follow me.
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John.
They came with me and the dance went on.

I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame.
The holy people said it was a shame.
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me high,
and left me there on a cross to die.¹

I first learned the hymn “I Danced in the Morning” as a child in a vacation church school in the 1960s. Its tune was upbeat, and the lyrics were in contemporary English (two verses appear above). Imagining Jesus and his disciples dancing their way through the Holy Land made this hymn feel hip like songs from the musical *Godspell*. Little did I know that as we sang about the “Lord of the Dance,” we were being inducted into centuries of negative Christian stereotypes of the Pharisees as stand-ins for Jews and Judaism, past and present. It’s “the holy people” who persecute and crucify Jesus. I will not sing this hymn today, but it still appears in an official hymnbook of the denomination in which I serve as a theologian. In our age of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, what went wrong?

In May 2019 the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome convened a multidisciplinary conference of distinguished scholars in biblical studies, historians of Judaism and Christianity, theologians, and other experts to travel together on a quest for the historical Pharisees and their relationship to both Judaism and Christianity.

¹ Sydney Carter, “I Danced in the Morning.” Text and Music © Stainer & Bell, Ltd. (admin. Hope Publishing Company), 1963.

Joseph Sievers (Pontifical Biblical Institute) and Amy-Jill Levine (Vanderbilt University and now of Hartford International University for Religion and Peace) have done us a great service by editing and publishing the papers from this international conference. This fine work will surely become a valuable reference work for scholars and advanced students of religions, Bible, theology, and ethics.

I have not been asked to evaluate the exegetical and historical scholarship of this work. As a former college professor who introduced undergraduates to critical biblical studies, however, I found the chapters highly informative. One theme that emerged for me was the elusive historical Pharisees. Critical scholarship has undermined the historical accuracy of many (but not all) of the representations of the Pharisees in the gospels, Acts, and Josephus, and cast doubt on some assumptions about the Pharisees in previous critical scholarship itself. Therefore, Christians should become more skeptical about what we claim to know with accuracy today about the Pharisees based on the available sources. Some degree of doubt about what we can know historically about the Pharisees can be used to demolish Christian stereotypes about the Pharisees as hypocrites, legalists, and enemies of Jesus. And because these stereotypes become generalized by many Christians to Jews past and present, their demolition will help to critique antisemitism in Christian behavior and anti-Judaism in Christian teaching.

The Pharisees is divided into part 1, "Historical Reconstruction," part 2, "Reception History," and part 3, "Looking to the Future." Some of the authors draw parallels between the various quests for the historical Jesus, Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism, and Christian origins. From the book's prelude, we learn how elusive the historical Pharisees have become regarding the different meanings assigned to the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words translated as "Pharisee" over the centuries. In part 2, "Reception History," chapters cover representations of the Pharisees in some of the early Christian writers, in art, the Oberammergau Passion Play, and in film. In part 3, "Looking to the Future," Amy-Jill Levine's chapter provides many constructive suggestions for preachers and teachers on improved ways to present the Pharisees to their congregations and classrooms taking account of more recent critical scholarship. Massimo Grilli and Joseph Sievers' final chapter concludes with seven hermeneutical guidelines that include some of the ethical issues involved in representing the Pharisees today. An appendix follows with an address by His Holiness Pope Francis to the Pontifical Biblical Institute on the final day of the international conference.

Following are examples of how received beliefs about the Pharisees (both beliefs among many readers of the New Testament, Josephus, and the Mishnah and beliefs among some scholars) are overturned or called into question by many scholars in this collection.

- Craig Morrison: “Though the name Pharisee had an original lexical meaning, today that meaning is lost. The often-repeated interpretation ‘separated’ begs the question, ‘separated from what or from whom?’” (18).
- Vasile Babota: Scholars’ efforts to detect the times when the Pharisees first appeared in history are “problematic” (39–40).
- Eric Meyers: “Identifying the Pharisees as a small, particular group within a complex society in first century Judea and Galilee is hard enough using textual sources; seeking their physical traces in the material record is even more difficult” (53).
- Steve Mason claims that Josephus did not become a Pharisee, contrary to how previous scholars interpreted the passage in his *Life*, 10–12. “This passage declares that he studied with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes because he *had expected* to find the best. But none of these schools met his yearnings” (106).
- Considering Galatians 1:13–17 and Philippians 3:2–9, Paula Fredriksen argues: “Paul was deeply committed to living Jewishly according to Pharisaic tradition” (132). “If on his own efforts he had achieved righteousness under the law faultlessly, then now that Christ lived in him, Paul could only be an even *better* Pharisee” (135).
- In the bitter criticism of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, Adela Yarbro Collins finds the author of Matthew’s gospel failed to exemplify the ethical standards of the Sermon on the Mount (chapter 5–7). “In writing [Matt 23], the evangelist did not practice what he taught elsewhere in his work. He transmits, as authoritative, the teaching of Jesus: ‘Whoever says “fool!” is liable to fiery Gehenna’ (Matt 5:22). At the same time he calls his rivals, who are his estranged ‘brothers’ of a sort, ‘fools’ in the third woe saying (23:17). This teaching of Jesus applies just as well to the use of epithets like ‘hypocrites,’ ‘blind,’ ‘snakes,’ and ‘offspring of vipers’” (168).
- Harold W. Attridge proposes that in the composition of John’s gospel, “the relationship of Nicodemus to Jesus may not be historical fact but a literary effort to find a representative of Judean leadership who could be cast as a possible follower of Jesus” (193).
- Yair Furstenberg acknowledges his reliance “on extensive scholarly reconstructions of the Pharisaic position” on the law (200). Considering these, he finds that “in his complaints against the Pharisees, Jesus was in fact siding with the Sadducees by building upon their arguments against the lenient and compromising Pharisaic law designed to gain popular acceptance” (204).
- Jens Schröter notes, “One striking similarity between the historical Jesus and the historical Pharisees is our limited knowledge of both” (220). He quotes Joseph Sievers: “We know considerably less about the Pharisees

than an earlier generation ‘knew’” (220).² Nevertheless, Schröter argues, “the gospels reveal knowledge of pre-70 [CE] Pharisees corroborated by Josephus and the Qumran writings. The depictions of the Pharisees in the gospels are therefore largely historically plausible, although some elements do not fit into a historical portrait” (236).

- Günter Stemberger finds in our times many historical scholars of Judaism in the ancient world do not identify the Pharisees with the founders of Rabbinic Judaism. “One important argument against it is the very poor personal connection between the two groups” (241).
- Shaye J. D. Cohen argues that “the framers of the Mishnah possessed only minimal Pharisaic self-consciousness, if they possessed it at all” (285).
- Abraham Skorka agrees with Cohen: “Indeed, the rabbis have very little to say about the Pharisees, with the earlier sources comparing them, favorably, to the Sadducees, but not with any direct testimony suggesting that the rabbis are themselves Pharisees” (292).
- Randall Zachman shows how both Luther and Calvin projected negative images of the Pharisees from the Synoptic Gospels into their polemics with Catholic authorities in the sixteenth century: “For both theologians, the Roman Church of their day strongly resembled the Pharisees in Jesus’ time, though for Luther this resemblance lay in their desire not to be like other sinners by doing exemplary works of the law, whereas for Calvin it lay in their corruption and eclipse of the Word of God in Scripture” (318).
- Susannah Heschel and Deborah Forger give an overview of how the Pharisees were set up as a foil for Jesus even in modern critical scholarship on the New Testament by Rudolf Bultmann, Joachim Jeremias, Ernst Käsemann, and Günter Bornkamm.
- In Philip A. Cunningham’s survey of representations of the Pharisees in Catholic religion textbooks and in a survey of Protestant educational texts by Stuart Polly that he cites, he found that in both “most negative assessments resulted from uncritical use of the Bible” (388). His recommendations include: “Accurate historical scholarship on the Pharisees should be utilized in textbooks. *While much remains unknown about them*, data from extrabiblical sources should be incorporated. At the very least, the texts should cite Paul’s proud self-identification as a Pharisee as well as the fidelity of the Pharisee Nicodemus” (400, my emphasis).

² Jens Schröter cites Joseph Sievers, “Who Were the Pharisees?,” in *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies in Two Major Religious Leaders*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Loren L. Johns (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 138.

- Amy-Jill Levine takes account of the disagreements among critical scholars about the historical Pharisees: “Nor do academics agree on what the name ‘Pharisee’ means or who the Pharisees were (if we did, there would be no need for this volume). While in some classrooms, students learn the distinction between rhetoric and history ... there is still no clear way of distinguishing which gospel texts concerning Pharisees are from Jesus, which from the tradition, and which from the redactor. Biblical studies experts do not even agree on basic issues such as whether John had access to the Synoptic Gospels or whether there was a Q source.... Finally, in the New Testament Introduction classroom, Pharisees as well as much of the Jewish context are often at best background noise, so the problems leading to anti-Jewish interpretation are not foregrounded” (411).
- Massimo Grilli and Joseph Sievers raise three basic questions that get at many of the issues suggested by the aforementioned examples: “ontological: *Who really were the Pharisees?*, epistemological: *What are the criteria needed to arrive at the Pharisees’ historically accurate identity?*, hermeneutical: *How do we interpret the texts that concern the Pharisees?*” (428). They also include case studies of stereotypes of the Pharisees in the scholarship of Joachim Jeremias and Norman Perrin. The case studies remind us that some historical-critical scholarship can communicate bias by perpetuating stereotypes of the Pharisees, Jews, or Judaism under the cover of critical research. Grilli and Sievers caution us: “For Christian scholars it is no longer possible to speak of the Pharisees on the sole basis of select gospel texts: *nor is it possible to rely uncritically on the scholarship of the past*” (432, my emphasis).

A set of open practical or pedagogical questions raised for me by *The Pharisees* includes whether and how, and how many Christians on a global scale will be influenced by its cutting-edge scholarship when scholars of the Pharisees disagree. Philosophers teach us that when the rational experts on a subject disagree one should become one’s own expert.³ This is an ideal of critical reflection that scholars are called to put into practice. In fact, members of guilds in biblical studies, history, theology, and religious studies call upon one another to practice this ideal. Today, however, how many Christian leaders in congregations and church-related institutions

³ This rule regarding disagreement among experts was proposed in a previous edition of Frank Boardman, Nancy Cavender, and Howard Kahane, *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric: The Use of Reason in Everyday Life*, 13th ed. (Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2018, 2014, 2012).

have an adequate theological education, time, critical conversation partners, and other resources to put this ideal into practice?

Theological and hermeneutical issues are also raised as I wondered how those conservative Christians who ascribe infallibility or inerrancy to the New Testament (those who have a high view of Scripture's veracity) will receive *The Pharisees*. Its contents provide much evidence of the fallibility of the New Testament's interpreters over time. Its chapters also provide ample evidence that the Pharisees we meet in the gospels and Acts are not always the historical Pharisees but rather literary characters and often stereotypes of Pharisees emerging from later conflicts between the early Christian movement and Jewish communities before and after 70 CE. Further, Adela Yarbro Collins' previously referenced chapter in my examples argues for the need for content criticism of Matthew's gospel when the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount are ignored by the evangelist in the hostile criticism of the Pharisees in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 23. Will many conservative Christians be willing to pay the price of admission (in terms of their views of the historicity of New Testament narratives and hermeneutics) to access and benefit from critical challenges to enduring stereotypes of Pharisees, Jews, and Judaism?

Could this rich new collection be improved? If there is a second edition of *The Pharisees*, the following additions would make this work more accessible to scholars beyond the guilds of biblical and historical studies to graduate students and advanced undergraduates:

- At the beginning or end of part 1, an overview chapter on the different types, ways, or models of representing the Pharisees in ancient sources and critical scholarship would be helpful for those first encountering critical scholarship about the Pharisees. Chapter 22 by Heschel and Forger provides some overview of modern historical scholarship.
- A brief appendix on essential primary sources and secondary literature for students approaching the Pharisees for the first time would be helpful. (A comprehensive index of all ancient sources already concludes the book.)
- A glossary of words, names, and titles in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, and German used in the articles where the scholar has not defined them in context would also be helpful. Some examples include: "Asidaioi in First and Second Maccabees" (xi), "Tannaitic literature" (72), "The Tosefta" (74), "Luke's *Sondergut*" (175), "the *Sektenbericht* of Luke-Acts" (178), "the Naassenes" (268), "the Karaites" (292), and so forth.

In conclusion, what is the theological and ethical significance of the elusive Pharisees for Christians today? Increased awareness of the various ancient sources and the history of critical research about the Pharisees helps us to learn and teach cautionary tales about how we often stereotype and distort our perceived enemies and opponents. And in that process of misrepresentation lies a road that can lead to conflict, violence against others, and the violation of our most sacred convictions. Hopefully, theological educators will find more effective ways to communicate persuasively to the pluralism of Christian audiences the fruit of critical scholarship made available in *The Pharisees*.

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II

A few years ago, I served on the oral exams committee of a graduate student whose first language is Turkish. After the exams, one of my colleagues asked this student about his plans after graduation. Was he going to return to his family in Turkey, or spend the summer working locally? The student smiled and responded, "I'm going home to see my family before starting work. I'm no Pharisee!" I assumed that I had misheard until my colleague asked, "What do you mean when you say you're not a Pharisee?" Our student looked surprised. "In my culture," he told us, "a Pharisee is someone who is unkind or uncharitable. I assumed this is an English word you knew."

This student was probably aware that the Pharisees, a Jewish sect in the late Second Temple period whose members were credited with the transmission of Jewish tradition, are prominently featured in the New Testament as the enemies of Jesus. But to him, the word "Pharisees" bore no relationship with those ancient people. What surprised me about my student's use of the term was not the word's negative connotation. I had heard many homilies decrying the Pharisees' corruption and knew that even Pope Francis has used the term in statements that implored Catholics to abstain from unethical behavior. What surprised me is that the association between the Pharisees and misanthropy was so dominant that it had made its way into a language and culture that was not predominantly Christian.

Given that the term "Pharisee" has been associated with unethical behavior since the first century, my reaction was probably naïve. The idea that the Pharisees are hypocritical, unethical, and corrupt finds expression throughout the gospels, even the Gospel of Matthew, which is perceived by scholars as the