



The Pharisees

01/05/2023 | ERIC C. SMITH

Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine, Eds.:

The Pharisees.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021, hardcover, xxiii + 482 pp.

The
PHARISEES

Edited by
JOSEPH SIEVERS
AMY-JILL LEVINE

A tension stretches taut through this book of essays about Pharisees. Pulling from one end is scholars' diminishing confidence about the kinds of historical or literary knowledge we can possess about them. One of the contributors quotes co-editor Joseph Sievers (writing in an earlier article), "We know considerably less about the Pharisees than an earlier generation 'knew'" (220). Anchoring the other end of the tension is the cavalier and self-assured way that many Christians spoke and speak about Pharisees, continuing to teach and preach theological slander that can inflict harm on contemporary Jews and has little grounding in good historiography or hermeneutics. This book, the edited proceedings of a conference organized across both religious and geographical differences, grapples with this tension admirably and offers a marvelous state-of-the-question survey to anyone interested in the scholarly and ethical dimensions of the study of Pharisees.

The volume is organized into three main parts. First comes a collection of thirteen essays (fourteen, if one counts Craig E. Morrison's etymological reflections that are listed as a "prelude") on historical reconstructions of Pharisees. This section takes up about half the book and reflects the shifting and strengthening pull of contemporary scholarly inquiries into Pharisees particularly and Second Temple Judaism generally. The overall effect of this section is to erode the certainties of previous generations of scholars. Morrison undermines the usefulness of etymologies for the term "Pharisee" and instead argues for descriptions based on usage of the term. Vasile Babota underscores the lack of clarity about the emergence of Pharisees, and Eric M. Meyers undermines common claims that Pharisees were especially concerned with purity in a way that was unusual for the time. Vered Noam reads 4QMMT as a record of halakic disputes in which Pharisaical positions may be identified. Steve Mason focuses on another important extant corpus, the works of Josephus, and finds it useful for isolating a few characteristics of Pharisees (such as distinctive interpretation, legal precision, leniency in legal judgments, and popularity) despite his "coolness" (81) or "disdain" (108) for the group. In a turn toward the New Testament, Paula Fredriksen offers a reading of New Testament texts, especially Paul's letters, with an eye toward Paul's Pharisaism, not as a defunct aspect of his past but as a vital aspect of his present identity. Henry Pat-tarumadathil explores the juxtaposition of Pharisees with Sadducees in the Gospel of Matthew, and Adela Yarbro Collins continues the focus on Matthew and especially its polemics against the opponents of Jesus and his followers in the "woes" of chapter 23. Helmut Löhr turns to Luke-Acts, seeing the two volumes as literary and not historical evidence for Pharisees and noting the depictions of closeness between Jesus and Pharisees. In the Gospel of John, Harold W. Attridge sees Pharisees as foils for Jesus and the author's claims but notes that Nicodemus is an intriguing counter-example. Yair Furstenberg understands Pharisees to be especially concerned with the "form" of law observance and reads their encounters with Jesus in that light. Jens Schröter also studies the relationship between Jesus (and Jesus' followers) and Pharisees but inflects it differently, noting important geographical, organizational, and eschatological differences (204). Turning to the rabbis, Günter Stemberger questions long-held assumptions about connections between Pharisees and the rabbinical movement and understands those connections as rooted in common Judaism and not in any special genealogical relationship.

The second part of the volume consists of ten essays on the reception of Pharisees, and here the book's ethical concerns move to the fore. Matthias Skeb opens the section by detailing how Pharisees function in Christian heresiologies to symbolize theological grievances. Luca Angelelli offers a very interesting statistical analysis of references to Pharisees in Greek literature that serves to confirm some of Skeb's observations. Focusing on references to Pharisees in classic rabbinic tradition, Shaye J.D. Cohen places Jewish concern with Pharisees relatively late. Likewise, Abraham Skorka, looking at medieval Jewish writers, argues that the rabbinical tradition does not consider Pharisees as an independent group. Turning to Christian theological movements, Randall Zachman provides a nuanced and sometimes surprising account of the rhetorical use of Pharisees in the works of Martin Luther and John Calvin. Angela La Delfa, in a chapter on Pharisees in art, confirms that Pharisees are usually depicted as Jews are depicted and offers some intriguing case studies. In a change of pace, Christian Stückl's essay on his own

involvement in the Oberammergau passion play opens a window into the ways modern scholarship informs (and often does *not* inform) performances that include Pharisees. Relatedly, Adele Reinhartz helps us see the consequences of historical reconstructions of Pharisees in culture, in this case in film, and shows how bias is mediated and transmitted outside of formal religious settings. A chapter by Susan-nah Heschel and Deborah Forger harkens back to the historical material in the first half of the volume, tracking the receptions of Pharisees in scholarship and their entanglements in intellectual, religious, and political movements. Finally, in this section Philip A. Cunningham surveys Catholic textbooks and catechetical materials for evidence of how Pharisees are mediated pedagogically and calls for further ecclesial and scholarly interventions into these materials.

A final section of two essays is titled “Looking to the Future,” and both contributors emphasize the ethical stakes of the study of Pharisees. Co-editor Amy-Jill Levine writes with her characteristic combination of charity and honesty, calling on Christians to examine their teaching and proclamation about Pharisees and Jews, to excise false and harmful stereotypes, and to contextualize references to Pharisees to combat rampant unfounded anti-Judaism. Massimo Grilli and co-editor Joseph Sievers helpfully summarize and categorize some of the major questions of the volume and offer constructive pathways forward. A final short piece, included as an appendix, presents the remarks of Pope Francis to the conference. The hopeful and forward-looking tone of the Pope’s remarks is welcome but somewhat at odds with the litany of historical and contemporary misreadings and even harm catalogued by many of the essays that preceded it. Again, the central tension of the book draws tight.

This volume manages to be both a helpful entry point for anyone interested in scholarship on Pharisees and an essential addition to the library of even the most seasoned scholar. It covers the major sources for information about Pharisees, asking the reader to reconsider received knowledge, and it follows and contributes to many ongoing scholarly conversations, summarizing the journey so far and surveying the road ahead. In this way, the tension at the center of the volume is unresolved and helpfully left in place: as scholars seek to know *more* about the Pharisees and their world, Christians and others who invoke Pharisees in religion and culture might seek to know and say *less*, adopting a posture of humility both toward the past and toward religious neighbors in the present.

Eric C. Smith, Assistant Professor of Early Christianity and Contemporary Christian Practices, Iliff School of Theology, Denver.

Source: [Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations 17](#), no. 1, 2023.