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The Pharisees: Their History, Character, and New Testament Portrait

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Abstract

Yinger, Kent L. *The Pharisees: Their History, Character, and New Testament Portrait*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022. ISBN 978-1666723786. \$29.00.

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Cover Page Footnote

Kent T. Maitland holds a ThM in New Testament from The Master's Seminary. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Theology & Apologetics at Liberty University.

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Kent L. Yinger is a seasoned New Testament (NT) scholar whose contribution has focused on the NT period's pervading theological beliefs and how they influence our understanding of the NT writers. His contribution up to this point has focused on Pauline studies, with multiple papers and a concise monograph exploring relevant issues for the New Perspective on Paul. This publication broadens the scope of his work beyond Paul to the study of the Gospels, with an investigation of the Pharisees, a relatively nebulous religious sect from the first century.

Yinger's strength as a writer is his ability to communicate a seemingly complex and intimidating issue in a way that's approachable to a novice. This study is no exception. His task is to explore the origin, beliefs, practices, and societal influence of the Pharisees from the time of the Maccabean revolt to the latter first century. Yet his agenda is, more simply, to determine the extent to which the Pharisees were hypocrites, or heroes, in the Biblical world. He devotes the first third of the book to an evaluation of the origin and historical character of the Pharisees, as reflected in Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), and other Rabbinic literature. Then, he turns to an analysis of their portrayal in the Gospels and other NT writings in an attempt to discern how the source material aligns with the Biblical record. This latter section represents the major focus of his study, comprising well over half its total page count. Nearly two-thirds is devoted to the study of the Gospels, which is not surprising given the relevance of the subject matter; the remaining third focuses on Acts and Pauline literature. Overall, he contends that, in light of the source material, "we Christians have largely misunderstood and consistently misrepresented the Pharisees" (185) by misreading who they were in their historical context and attributing to them certain tendencies and beliefs they did not exhibit. As a corrective, he seeks to offer a fresh historical analysis that challenges Christendom's conventional characterization of the Pharisees as a mostly antagonistic group of religious elites. He concludes with the suggestion that Christians should cautiously evaluate whether the unfavorable qualities they perceive in the NT can fairly apply to all Pharisees, or whether they might only describe the tendencies of some.

Yinger admits in his introduction that a paucity of source material limits a thorough study of the Pharisees. Outside the NT, he lists Josephus, the Mishna, the Tosefta, the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, and the midrashim as possible sources. In one of his subsequent chapters, he also comments on the relevance of the DSS when considering the debate between Pharisees and other Jews over how to interpret obedience to Biblical commands. Overall, however, as the study progresses, the only source with any significant staying power appears to be Josephus.

One reason is that Rabbinic sources' veracity is severely limited. In his words, they are useful for little more than "illustrative purposes" (59), providing possible glimpses of the sort of behavior the Pharisees espoused, but little objective description of who they were in their historical context. For matters such as where the Pharisees first originated, what their influence may have been among the Jewish commoners, what their interpretation of Torah looked like in the Jewish community, their temperament as zealots, their political influence among the Herodians, etc., Josephus becomes the lone source.

Josephus is the historian in his batch of sources, so it is not surprising to lean so heavily on him for historical data. At the same time, an over-reliance on a singular source risks making the study's more significant conclusions untenable. Particularly in areas where Yinger challenges the conventional interpretation of passages in the NT, the discussion is seemingly reduced to a "this source vs. that source" proposition concerning what to believe about the Pharisees. Were they, for example, a group of elitists who looked contemptuously at those who did not adhere to Torah regulations in the way they did? This would seem to be the case with Mark 2:13–17, where Jesus retorts that he came to "call not the righteous, but sinners" after eating a meal with tax collectors and sinners. Yinger suggests, however, that "this near-consensus view" of the Pharisees "is almost certainly wrong" because "it cannot be squared with the popularity and respect for the Pharisees among the masses as seen in Josephus" (102). But if Josephus is the only real basis for so boldly challenging a commonly held view, the question becomes why Josephus is to be preferred over what would otherwise appear obvious in the NT, especially given that, as Yinger admits, Josephus "has only limited comments on the Pharisees, and even in these he was probably not giving us unbiased reporting" (xvii). If Josephus were one from a composite of sources, the consideration would carry more weight; but to challenge a conventional understanding that seems derived from what the NT says plainly, the interpreter needs more than one source to sustain it. This represents the challenge Yinger faces in conducting such a study: Any new ground to break will require more than what is currently available in our historical record, if it is to be persuasive. So long as the record remains thin, the argument will hinge on why we should privilege one source over another in formulating the historical portrait.

This problem is also apparent in Yinger's utilization of *halakhah* in order to nuance the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees over Torah obedience. Perceiving the general tension between the Qumran community and the Pharisees, as evidenced by a diatribe in the DSS against "seekers of smooth things," he suggests that there may have been a more widespread debate between Jews over such matters as Sabbath observance, fasting, purity rituals, etc. Likewise, the vitriolic language we observe in the DSS is similar to the language that would naturally circulate in such a debate. Similarly, he suggests that Jesus' tension with the Pharisees over

such ritual matters amounted to the same “in-house” debate between religious observing Jews. Moreover, Jesus’ stinging invective against the Pharisees is nothing more than a reflection of the language that typically circulated in such debates. In a sense, then, Jesus’ interaction with the Pharisees was like that of a zealous Essene contending for a particular mode of obedience (53).

This equivalence leads to one of Yinger’s most controversial suggestions concerning how we should understand Jesus’ diatribe against the Pharisees in Matthew 23: his indictments against the Pharisees, and his corresponding pronouncements of “Woe!”, are an exercise in invective, not description. The premise that Jesus engaged in invective is not necessarily difficult to accept; what’s difficult is what this seems to imply concerning the historical veracity of the Biblical text. Is it so simple that Jesus did not target all Pharisees generally and that he only intended to discredit a smaller group from within the Pharisees who were standing against him (162)? Why, then the exaggeration in heaping “woes” on all Pharisees without qualification? And why does Matthew never include the qualification in the chapter’s seven total occurrences? Is the meaning of Jesus’ words so easily lost to the modern reader without a knowledge of the DSS or the debate tactics of the Essenes?

The question is whether the debate reflected in the DSS is as instructive for our understanding of the NT as Yinger appears to make it in his study. Is it possible that the debate was actually more isolated than what he would like to infer? After all, Qumran appears to have been a sectarian community, meaning, by definition, its members were “outsiders” in the broader context of Jewish society. Perhaps the DSS could be illustrative of the sort of debate one would expect to find in Jewish society, and even an echo of the sort of debate Jesus had with the Pharisees; but the question remains whether the DSS provides a significant enough insight into Jewish society to alter what the Biblical text appears to be saying. Some may have difficulty accepting the proposition that the pronouncements in Matthew 23 were an exaggeration directed against a relatively small group, especially if the basis for doing so is a source that may not be immediately relevant to the context.

On balance, Yinger’s study serves a need both for the historian and the Biblical expositor. For the historian, Yinger uses a fresh analysis of ancient sources to provide a welcomed reevaluation of a notable religious sect within Judaism. Such sources are not limited to the writings of the NT, but encompass other literature that may not have been adequately synthesized into a substantive historical portrait of who they were. By providing a more comprehensive synthesis of the source material, Yinger offers a more accurate glimpse into who the Pharisees were in their historical context. On the other hand, his observations as a historian offer a considerable challenge to the conclusions Christians draw based on an ill-informed interpretation of the Biblical text. Taking his carefully crafted historical portrait of the Pharisees, Yinger turns to key areas in the NT where such conclusions are usually drawn and offers an exegesis that reconsiders the historical data. While his exegesis

may be debatable, it serves as a word of caution to the interpreter to calibrate what he or she tends to assume to ensure the historical veracity of their own conclusions. Whether for the benefit of historiography or the sermon, Yinger's emphasis on taking little for granted, and utilizing every bit of the surviving traces we have available, will enrich the reader's understanding of the Biblical world.