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## BOOK REVIEW

### ***Hypocrites or Heroes? The Paradoxical Portrayal of the Pharisees in the New Testament.* By Roger Amos, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015, 230 pp.**

Surprises await the readers of this book, especially if they are Christians familiar with the Bible's references to hypocrites and hypocrisy. Authored by a recently retired British pastor who also is a technical science writer, its eight chapters are solidly consistent with the positive and negative references to the Pharisees and their conduct in the New Testament. Although not a sociologist, much of Amos's discussion can be interpreted as a sociological analysis of the Pharisees and their real and alleged hypocrisies.

The origin of his study is traced to his dissertation for a distance learning M.A. in Aspects of Biblical Interpretation from the London School of Theology. While exploring the question of precisely who were the often-mentioned "sinners" in the gospels, he read a footnote claiming that Jesus and his disciples were Pharisees. He "concluded that the 'sinners' were Jews outside the Pharisee movement" because Phariseeism was "the normative Judaism of first-century Palestine" (p. ix).

The Greek word for *Pharisees* appears 98 times in the New Testament, but alternative labels applied to them bring the total to 240, far surpassing appearances of traditional keywords like *cross* (28 times), *remission/forgiveness* (17), and *redemption* (10). The Pharisees were continually checking up on Jesus, confronting him with trick questions, presenting him with challenging circumstances and persons, and calling attention to themselves.

Jesus, Amos shows, was so often on the side of the Pharisees, enjoying friendly relationships with them and supporting their ideals, that his early ministry often seemed oriented toward the goal of reforming Pharisaic Judaism. Not only that, but much evidence strongly suggests that Jesus was "unmistakably a Pharisee himself" (p. 163). He and his disciples observed the Pharisaic code of conduct based on the *paradosis*, the oral law. The Pharisees recognized him as a teacher. On at least three occasions they invited him to dinner. His core beliefs were the same as theirs. Certain Pharisees warned him of Herod's desire to kill him (Luke 13:31). He never declared their theology incorrect, as he did of the Sadducees (Matthew 22:23-33). He often used language characteristic of the Pharisees, and he told his hearers to obey the Pharisees' teachings. His criticisms were not against them as persons but against their behavioral inconsistencies and hypocrisies.

Among the topics analyzed in this book are "The Jews" in John's Gospel, discussions of Pharisees in rabbinical literature and the works of Josephus, historical reconstructions of the origin of the Pharisees, the Pharisees at the time of Jesus, and his relationships with them. Possibly most important is the presentation and explanation of the paradox concerned with issues related to criticisms of Jesus' "Sabbath breaking" and other alleged violations of Jewish

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Law by Pharisees who themselves were working to relax legalistic regulations by devising legal loopholes to reduce the inconveniences imposed by strict legalism.

A major theme is that "The Pharisees are the unrecognized and unsung heroes of the western world" (p. 213). Jesus so clearly adopted and built upon their theology and praxis that all of his Christian followers are in many ways members of "an enhanced Pharisaism" (p. 212). They were no more hypocrites than are you, I, and all humanity. "Inasmuch as all believers advocate that one should serve a God whom they themselves fail to satisfy, all are hypocrites" (p. 211). That all are hypocrites also can be demonstrated on strictly secular grounds, as in *Why Everyone (Else) Is a Hypocrite* by evolutionary psychologist Robert Kurzban.

Amos carefully analyzes the biblical reports of Jesus' actions and teachings, conscientiously probing their sociocultural and historical contexts with the help of extra-scriptural references to the Pharisees and interpretations presented in the 42 sources listed in his Bibliography. It and the Index of Names and Subjects (unfortunately omitting "Sociology, 5, 119, 158") make the book an excellent resource for any investigation of the subject of hypocrisy. The eight-page double-column Index of Biblical References also can be used as a topic-related Bible concordance.

Chapter 2, the longest chapter (pp.11-89), can serve as a model for in-depth study of any topic in the Bible. Including attention to specific agendas of the New Testament writers, it consolidates and compares the numerous references to Pharisees in the synoptic gospels, analyzes their treatment in John's Gospel, and then does the same for Acts, which is followed by brief summaries of their mentions in four of the Epistles.

This book clarifies the picture of Christianity's original social and religious environment. Even more importantly, it leads to a deeper understanding of Jesus, the focal point of the world's most populous religion. Knowledge of the people with whom he frequently interacted significantly aids one's appreciation of him. It clearly demonstrates that the Pharisees of Gospel times can be characterized collectively both as Hypocrites and Heroes, but much better as the latter. It also demonstrates the principle that biblical references to the Pharisees should be interpreted in light of their total biblical picture, not by treating each incident separately as if it can be properly understood in isolation. A general lesson that emerges for Bible interpretation is "the need to be imaginative in the exegesis of God's word, [sometimes under] the necessity to recreate the missing pieces of the puzzle" (p. 214).

This otherwise thorough book does lack attention to at least one significant subtopic, the socially constructive and functional purposes and consequences of much hypocrisy. The word *hypocrisy* itself usually has so many negative undertones that its beneficial roles are completely overshadowed.

This study is a thorough and compelling resource for teaching and studying hypocrisy in general, not only in relationship to social groups and relationships in the society of which Jesus was a part. Nevertheless, only rarely does one get the impression that Amos is tediously tracing

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every alternative interpretation of the biblical texts he cites. He unequivocally fulfills the hope expressed in the Foreword by Dr. Pieter Lalleman, Academic Dean and Tutor of New Testament in Spurgeon's College, "that this book will help to eradicate the caricatures of the Pharisees and that it will contribute to a better mutual understanding of Jews and Christians, as well as of who the Lord Jesus is" (p. viii). Surprisingly he also shows that "the breach between Jesus and the Pharisees was never too wide to be crossed" (p. viii).

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