



What to the Enslaved Is “Happiness”? A View from the Psalter

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I struggled with this article. Reflections on happiness in the Psalter come from a certain place for me. I grew up in west Dayton, Ohio; during the de facto segregation of the era, that was where African Americans were allowed to live. The language of the pursuit of happiness sounded like a path to “good life.” Investigation of happiness, however, must address a diverse audience.

On the seventy-sixth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, someone thought it a good idea to ask Frederick Douglass to address his hometown crowd in Rochester, New York. Douglass chided exuberant celebrants of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that overlooks the realities of colonized life for persons of color. Positive psychology and naïve political ideology trivialize happiness by ignoring the reality of the trauma of racial capitalism.

In a prayer, a man remembers his father, a pious man, who was certain that God would heed and prayed that freedom would come soon, during his lifetime. However, his father was two years dead when emancipation came. What does happiness mean to that person?

The word happiness, like the word love, is capable of multiple shades of meaning, many of which seem rather shallow. A number of psalms use a word that is translated “happy” or “happiness,” but the Hebrew text points to a much deeper and nuanced meaning that “represents a resonance between the identity of God and the identity of a believer.”

The five-year Pursuit of Happiness Project, hosted by Emory University's Center for the Study of Law and Religion (CSLR) and funded by the John Templeton Foundation, culminated in a conference in Atlanta, December 11–13, 2009. Several essays from the conference were published in a volume. I have three observations about the patterns of the papers: (1) The papers assumed a historicist perspective affirming that if we can recover authorial intention and the present-day misapprehension on happiness, those ancient voices would refute contemporary excesses and misreading.¹ (2) Those papers, which were read in the era of Obama, reflect a “colorblind” reading that fit well into a post-racial optimism about exegetical method. (3) The papers converse with positive psychology to reflect more complexity. When you make the reflection on a theological and biblical question more inclusive, the biblical-theological reflection is more robust.

A problem in the recovery of biblical views of happiness as a concept suffers from certain constraints. Word pollution about happiness causes contemporary readers to miss the mark of authentic happiness, according to Martin E. P. Seligman, a founder of the positive psychology movement.² The reference to word pollution embodies a historicist perspective on the task. The early American Declaration of Independence coined the phrase “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” which involves the word pollution that trades original meanings with the contemporary syntax based in the social construction of the authors.³ Many cursory readers and writers flatten the terms “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and redefine the reader to a search and trek. However, this disagrees with the description of the Revolutionary War.⁴ Schlesinger demonstrates that the term “pursuit of happiness” should be rendered “practicing of happiness.”⁵

The language often quoted “pursuit of happiness” means, in both English and the Bible, practice that gives rise to happiness. Biblical presentation of happiness in the Psalter in its contemporary context requires an awareness of intellectual traditions of classical European philosophy culminating with Aristotle and positive psychology authors and readers. The scholars of *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness* want to avoid using the references to happiness as an essentialization and definition of human happiness. “Happiness in the Psalter is neither a packaged given nor a static state.”⁶

¹ Brent Strawn, “Epilogue: The Triumph of Life: Towards a Biblical Theology of Happiness,” in Brent A. Strawn, ed., *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Brent Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

² Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press, 2002); Brent Strawn, “The Bible and . . . Happiness?” in Strawn, *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 5.

³ Strawn, “Bible and . . . Happiness?,” 6.

⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, “The Lost Meaning of ‘The Pursuit of Happiness,’” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 21 (1964), no. 3: 325–27.

⁵ Schlesinger, 327.

⁶ William Brown, “Happiness and Its Discontents in the Psalms,” in Strawn, *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 98.

The impulse to extend the table of readers gets a voice. Steven J. Sandage makes the point that "happiness" requires attention to varieties of religious happiness that attend to individual difference and cultural diversity.⁷ The circumstances of US public discourse on happiness have changed. Racial strife and the conversation about diversity are polarizing, and the term *diversity* itself has become an inflammatory term and concept. A complex view of biblical happiness in the Psalter recognizes that life finds a way. Brent Strawn has us recall the Michael Crichton novel-turned-movie *Jurassic Park*, in which chaos theorist Dr. Ian Malcolm (played by Jeff Goldblum) sets forth an assumption that carries forth in the movie series, namely "Life finds a way." As we consider happiness in the Psalms, we recognize that life and happiness find a way(s) for the descendants of enslaved persons, and others—ways that decenter much of current biblical analysis.⁸ Happiness has both a plot in the canon and a context in history and time.

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The task, however, does not stop with biblical theology. Ellen T. Charry understands systematic theology as a pastoral enterprise. She provides a treatment of the Christian doctrine of happiness.⁹ Paul J. Wadell uses the theme of happiness to explore the Christian moral life.¹⁰ Charry creates a term derived from the biblical Hebrew term for happiness, "asherism," as a way to a "realizing eschatology of growth" from the beauty and wisdom of God.¹¹ "Asherism teaches that happiness is an enjoyable, obedient life."¹² When the asherist reads intelligence and nature theologically, that person recognizes that the happiness of God provides the foundation and context of human happiness.¹³ Charry, in a separate book, discloses: "My attention turned to happiness when my beloved husband and companion

⁷ Steven J. Sandage, "The Transformation of Happiness: A Response from Counseling Psychology," in Strawn, *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 269–72.

⁸ Strawn, "The Triumph of Life," 287.

⁹ Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 18; Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

¹⁰ Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2012).

¹¹ Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 157.

¹² Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 163.

¹³ Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 168.

died an untimely and pointless death.”¹⁴ Scholars and pastors today will not settle for cheap happiness.

North African theologian Augustine of Hippo claimed that happiness in this life is an unrealistic expectation.¹⁵ Happiness in a narrowed terrestrial sense avoids relief from dread and a wrathful, punishing God. One could land in the world of happiness when a believer has a belief or hope in the forgiveness of sins, thus nullifying the dread of an exacting God of vengeance.¹⁶ Anselm discerns a balance between two aspects of God’s heart. Western theology treats cultural trauma as personal eschatology but encourages religion as a common good.¹⁷

Waldemar Janzen examined the happiness (*’ašrê*) sayings in the Hebrew Bible and examined them disaggregated from their locations, including the psalm genres. He remarks that there were twenty-six occurrences in the Psalter. He argues that they function as a formula. The structure opens a colon or bicolon, followed by a word or clause that explicates the person or group and a statement that describes the basis of the pronouncement. Sometimes the saying/formula has a noun and relative clause or a participial construction, other times a simple relative clause or participial clause.¹⁸

The background contains ups and downs. Happiness brings us back to Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July celebration. This essay begins with a survey of the *’ašrê* sayings in the Psalter. Reflection on happiness and the *’ašrê* sayings provides an opportunity to consider again how happiness informs building community in the twenty-first century amid deep division and racial strife.

The sayings have a coherence even when they don’t comprise an anthology of proverbial sayings. The Hebrew *’ašrê* sayings have a variety of translations, of which “blessed” and “happy” are the most frequent. Another translation option, “fortunate,” derives from the Latin *fortuna*, and “felicitous” is yet another translation of the Hebrew term *’ašrê*.¹⁹ The *’ašrê* sayings all have common elements: divine agency, God’s forgiveness of sins, God’s election of a nation, God’s education, and protection of an individual.

The *’ašrê* sayings in the Psalms provide a compilation of rhetorical devices. A projected *Sitz im Leben* of a formula typically adapted to be an organic part of a psalm is difficult, if not impossible, to date. Further, it provides little descriptive context.²⁰ A reader who tries to essentialize these into a definition of happiness misconstrues the functions of the sayings to construct an edifice acceptable to an

¹⁴ Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, ix.

¹⁵ Charry, “The Necessity of Divine Happiness: A Response from Systematic Theology,” in Strawn, *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 232.

¹⁶ Charry, “The Necessity of Divine Happiness,” 233.

¹⁷ Charry, “The Necessity of Divine Happiness,” 234.

¹⁸ Waldemar Janzen, “*’Ašrê* in the Old Testament,” *Harvard Theological Review* 58, no. 2 (April 1965): 217.

¹⁹ Brown, “Happiness and Its Discontents in the Psalms,” in Strawn, *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 99.

²⁰ Janzen, “*’Ašrê* in the Old Testament,” 218.

imputed congregation of early American writers. "The *'ašrê* saying commends a condition, practice, or virtue considered eminently desirable."²¹

The Psalter claims human flourishing over human depravity. "Unlike in Proverbs, the righteous suffer in the Psalms while the wicked remain immune from pain."²² Brown suggests a typology of sayings based on theme and orientation. The first category that he suggested is *divine agency*. The sayings are marked by God's forgiveness, election, and education.²³ The pattern of jussive-laden petition envisions abundant familial and agricultural prosperity. Psalms 31:1–2; 33:12; 94:12–13 (God does the choosing), and Psalm 65:5 have a dimension of divine agency, but also choice by the penitent.

The grammatical form of the rhetorical device gives certain clues. First, while *'ašrê* sayings include substantive use for the participle to point to a social group, some also use titles: a person practicing happiness is described by the title "persons of standing" in Psalms 1:1; 33:12; 34:9; and 40:4. However, this virtue has affinities with and gestures to the theme of refuge in God (see Ps 2:12).

The Psalter has a plot and a shape that gesture toward meaning.²⁴ Torah (Pentateuch) and prophetic witnesses of Isaiah indicate happiness in Isaiah and beyond.²⁵ Christian Scriptures have a plot and organization that testify to the triumph of life, happiness, and resilience. The traditions of pilgrimage are a rehearsal of the history of practicing happiness of the *'ašrê* sayings.

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Happiness in the Psalms is rooted in relationship with God. A person and people who took and take refuge in God, not in progress; for the hope of happiness is resonance with God. The titles point to virtues and status. The first *'ašrê* saying occurs in the first psalm. It defines happiness as the exercise of proper social interaction. Psalm 2 ends with an *'ašrê* saying that refers to the happiness rooted in taking refuge in God. The presence of an *'ašrê* saying at the beginning of Psalm 1 and the end of Psalm 2 indicates an editorial device to combine these two originally independent psalms into a grafted unity. Psalm 34, an acrostic wisdom psalm, returns to the practice of happiness in the demonstration of allegiance to God as refuge, as at Psalm 2:12.

²¹ Brown, "Happiness and Its Discontents in the Psalms," 98.

²² Brown, "Happiness and Its Discontents in the Psalms," 114

²³ Brown, "Happiness and Its Discontent in the Psalms," 100.

²⁴ Strawn, "The Triumph of Life," 290–300.

²⁵ Jacqueline Lapsley, "A Happy Blend: Isaiah's Vision of Happiness (and Beyond)," in Strawn, *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 75–94.

Happiness extends the advocacy of table fellowship. “Happy is the one who considers the poor” indicates that happiness as a human agency includes advocacy for the most vulnerable of the community. Psalm 41 begins with an *’ašrê* saying that underlines human agency embedded in a final psalm in Book 1 of the Psalter. The psalm contains the *’ašrê* saying (vv. 1–3) followed by a recollection of past prayers (vv. 4–10), followed with a proclamation of concluding praise (vv. 11–13). The *’ašrê* saying assumes that the advocacy of the believer matches divine compassion.

Relationship with God includes happiness in Torah and temple. Psalm 1 accents the relationship between God and the person who organizes their life through social organization and the dynamic relationship with Torah. Both Psalms 1 and 119:1–2 accent the power of Torah and the happiness through Torah psalms. Psalm 1 begins with an *’ašrê* saying rooted in group affiliation. It also sets up a moral binary of the wicked and the persons conforming to the instruction of God, those who delight in the Torah of God (Ps 1:2). Psalm 119:1–2 uses the *’ašrê* sayings to testify to the efficacy of the Torah. As one reviews the sayings, one notices that the *Sitz im Leben* of happiness is the house of God (Ps 84:12–13). The combination of God’s abode and Torah function as the focal point as an object of love. Happiness occurs in the context of objects of love.²⁶ The virtue element brings together obedience to God and imitation of God.²⁷

Two psalms, Psalm 32 and Psalm 33, frame the issue of happiness. Psalm 32 begins with a double *’ašrê* saying. In this case the function frames happiness with divine assessment of the psalmist as innocent. The practice of happiness carries as an emblem divine forgiveness and imputed innocence. Psalm 33 roots the practice of happiness in the exercise of proper allegiance to God. The agent practicing happiness here is communal, the gentile nation—people groups of standing and power such as the reference to the people.

An important collection of sayings provides expressions of *divine agency*, which again return “the person” and readers to relationship with God. Happy is the person whose transgressions are forgiven and to whom the Lord imputes no guilt (Ps 32:1–2), the community of faith decision for God yields divine election and the concomitant heritage (Ps 33:12). Human selection of God leads to divine election of the community (Ps 65:5). Happiness is a byproduct of discipline and adherence to divine law (Ps 94:12–13). The residue of happiness highlights God’s forgiveness of sins, divine election, and divine education of the human community. All these point to the grace elements of happiness.²⁸

Another group of *’ašrê* sayings demonstrates a *focus on human agency*. These emphasize human virtues. However, human virtue finds a context in divine agency. Liturgical virtues (Ps 89:16), justice (Ps 106:3; 41:2), fear of YHWH (Ps

²⁶ Brown, “Happiness and Its Discontents in the Psalms,” 111.

²⁷ Brown, “Happiness and Its Discontents in the Psalms,” 113

²⁸ Brown, “Happiness and Its Discontents in the Psalms” 99.

112:1; 128:1), trust in YHWH (Ps 40:4), and proper interaction with other believers are human virtues.

Another important collection of sayings provides expressions *joint agency*—or, more appropriately, *relational agency*, referring to the emphasis on the divine-human relationship. The metaphor of refuge designates the relational character between the believer and God as an expression of space (Ps 2:12b; 34:9b; 52:9). The fourth and final psalm of this category frames the relationship in tribal terms: “the God of Jacob” (Ps 146:5).²⁹

Psalms 111 (a thanksgiving psalm) and Psalm 112 (an “extended beatitude”) canonically work as twin acrostic psalms. Psalms 111 and 112 resemble Psalms 1 and 119 and also celebrate the Torah. The parallelism of God as benefactor gives franchise to person who fears the Lord. When one fears the Lord, one enters the works of the Lord embodied in instruction.³⁰ The connection between believer and God becomes a vehicle for happiness. “To be happy is, in the estimation of Psalms 111–112, to be godly.”³¹ The nature of divine happiness funds the happiness of the believer.

Happiness as relationship with God indicates that happiness represents a resonance between the identity of God and the identity of a believer. The foundation of the practice of happiness in God refutes a shallow optimism. John Stroyer reports that his father, a pious enslaved man, prayed with his family that God would remove the scourge of enslavement. The children thought that surely their father’s piety would move God to break into history quickly. But their father died two years before the end of the Civil War.³² Neither the piety of the father nor the optimism that soon the moral arc of history would bend brought happiness.

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This was a struggle for the people described by Douglass in his article as he contemplated the celebration of the Fourth of July, and even for people like me. Happiness stretches beyond history and progress into an eschatological reality. The *’ašrê* sayings stand behind the beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew and in Luke.³³

The practice of happiness includes appreciation and proclamation of human agency, the things we do as believers, divine agency, the providential things God does for believers, and the way human and divine agency move back and forth.

²⁹ Brown, “Happiness and Its Discontents in the Psalms,” 102–03.

³⁰ James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 360.

³¹ Brown, “Happiness and Its Discontents in the Psalms,” 105.

³² Jacob Stroyer, “A Slave Father’s Prayer,” in *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans*, ed. James Melvin Washington (Harper Collins: New York, 1994), 95.

³³ Brown, “Happiness, and Its Discontents,” 98.

Finally, the nature and happiness of God through divine and human agency give testimony to God's liberative, empathetic, and compassionate nature that provokes the practice of happiness. ⊕

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