

Theology and Ministry 3 (2014): 8.1–3
ISSN 2049-4513

Book Review

The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness

What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life

Ed. Brent A. Strawn

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

pp xvii + 430, pb, ISBN 978-0-19-979573-4, £22.99

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It is always difficult to find helpfully constructive examples of theological work that span both biblical studies and practical present-day concerns. One of the abiding challenges of trying to handle scripture well at the same time as addressing an issue that looms large today is that the demands of biblical studies often seem to pull writers away from the pressing existential questions of human life. Against such an academic background it is a pleasure to welcome this thoughtful and probing collection of essays that succeeds where so many fail. Not only is this book a fine treatment of its advertised topic – scriptural angles on what it is to be happy – but it is a model of the kind of inter-disciplinary work that is so much needed in our age of over-specialisation.

Editor Brent Strawn is to be congratulated not just for pulling together the papers here, which emerge from a five-year project at Emory University funded by the Templeton foundation, but also for writing a substantial introduction to the volume, and then also lucid summary introductions to each sub-section within it. His opening piece, 'The Bible and ... Happiness?', reviews the potential pitfalls awaiting such a collection, and then focuses on contrasting some ancient and modern notions of happiness. Aristotle looms large in the former, with his notion of the good life, or human flourishing, while positive psychology looms large in the latter. This movement, derived from the work of Martin Seligman and others, is seen to hold out much potential for genuine insight, but thereby raises the question (for biblical scholars and theologians) of what scripture might contribute to such concerns. Strawn is clear that the goal is not so much 'what does the Bible then say about happiness?', but rather how to define, or redefine, (positive psychological) happiness in dialogue with the Bible.

There then follow thirteen essays in three parts. Part One on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament contains five essays. Terence Fretheim writes on 'God, Creation, and the Pursuit of Happiness', offering a helpful broad-brush opening, with a focus on God's own happiness being shared in creation with both humans and the whole created order. Nathan MacDonald offers a model account of how to work with two different

traditions simultaneously with 'Is There Happiness in the Torah?'. There is, as he notes, a great deal of *un*-happiness in the Torah, but MacDonald finds a core value in the theme of rest: the good and happy life is marked by rest, whether at meals, in the promised land, or at the end of a full life. The result is that God's people are on their way to happiness rather than fully attaining it. Three further essays explore the prophets (Jacqueline Lapsley); the Psalms (William Brown); and the wisdom literature (Carol Newsom). Recurrent themes include the distinction between flourishing and 'hedonism', and the importance of scripture's interest in setting forth the conditions within which flourishing occurs, rather than pointing in any straightforward way to how to secure it.

Part Two contains four essays on the New Testament. Here we have Carl Holladay on the beatitudes; Joel Green on the 'topsy-turvy' happiness of Luke-Acts; and Greg Carey on 'apocalyptic happiness' – an unexpected category (!) but one which he explicates as promoted through the unmasking of deception, and the summoning of people to lives of purpose. One of the most successful essays in the book, I think, is Colleen Shantz's study of happiness in Paul. She works with some of Seligman's categories to ask which of them seem plausible in a Pauline perspective. In brief: while the pleasurable life and the good life may not be attainable, the meaningful life is Paul's attainable goal; and one which people can be educated to pursue. The title of her piece is 'I Have Learned to be Content' (cf Phil. 4:11). Speaking personally, I found this piece tremendously helpful in allowing a scriptural shaping to what counts as the happy life, which is in a sense the goal of the book.

Part Three broadens out to contain four pieces on 'Beyond the Bible', bringing perspectives from other disciplines. The first is Ellen Charry's 'The Necessity of Divine Happiness'. Charry has written a whole book related to the theme of this collection (*God and the Art of Happiness*, Eerdmans, 2010), and offers here an excellent piece on how systematic theology must take seriously the happiness of God and of God's creatures, rather than jump always to deferring all hope of happiness to the eschatological world to come. God is not so unhappy with God's creation, she argues, in dialogue with the biblical contributions earlier in the book. Indeed, humanity's flourishing gives God great satisfaction. The next two pieces will almost certainly commend themselves to people approaching the book from the practical theology end of the discussion: Thomas Long writing on a practical theological response to the discussion; and Steven Sandage offering a response from pastoral counselling. The editor then concludes the section with a substantive piece on a 'biblical theology of happiness', centred on the notion of the 'triumph of life'. Here Strawn traces this theme through the Bible, and contrasts this with shallow responses in popular literature that affirm happiness by effectively refusing to engage with struggle and lament. Scripture, in contrast, affirms the triumph of life by facing squarely all that can and does go wrong, and insisting that God works that triumph in and through the difficulties.

A final contribution, running to almost 50 pages, is an invaluable study resource on 'A Biblical Lexicon of Happiness', where Michael Chan works patiently through all the Hebrew and Greek terms relevant to the topic.

As Ellen Charry says in this volume, it is time to rebalance the theological discussion of life lived in a world that is both good and fallen. There is plenty that we (and God) may be unhappy about in our world. But there is an undergirding happiness in the creator and the creation that will indeed triumph. All in all, this is a very helpful book that will resource intelligent further enquiry into the subject of happiness. I commend it very highly both for its detailed studies of specific biblical and theological texts and themes, but also because of its success at modelling how to work across both the ancient and modern horizons of a topic of practical significance for today.

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