

Brent A. Strawn. *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 430 pages. \$35.

The *Pursuit of Happiness* is a collection of essays written for a conference held at Emory University's Center for the Study of Law and Religion in Atlanta, GA, in 2009. The thirteen essays in the collection attempt to discern what the bible communicates about happiness in conversation with the positive psychology movement. The essayists define happiness with the aid of Aristotle in two different ways: *hedonic* happiness is achieved when one attains wealth and material goods; *eudaimonic* happiness is realized when one has a good reputation and honor along with such things as numerous friendships, worthy friendships, good children, numerous children and good old age (13-15). Part one contains five essays about the Hebrew Bible including Genesis and creation, the Torah, Isaiah, Psalms, and Wisdom literature. In part two, the essays cover the Kingdom of God, Luke-Acts, the apostle Paul, and Apocalyptic literature. In part three, essayists from systematic theology, practical theology, counseling psychology and biblical theology respond to the essays of the biblical scholars.

As it relates to the Hebrew Bible, Terence Fretheim posits that happiness is a characteristic of the divine life and is evidenced in God's own happiness. Indeed God bears evidence of God's happiness when God is "pleased, delighted, and joyful" (34). Biblical texts such as Psalm 35:27, 44:3, and 51:8 demonstrate divine affectability or the ability of God to be moved by human actions. The church has tended to focus on God's anger. Fretheim challenges readers to imagine the impact on the lives of Christians if we emphasized divine joy rather than divine anger.

Nathan McDonald asserts that in the Torah, happiness for one person or community often came at the expense of another. Abraham became wealthy at Pharaoh's expense. Leah's happiness came at Rachel's expense. Jacob found happiness at Laban's expense. Happiness for the Israelites came at the expense of the Canaanites.

According to Joel Green, those who lived according to Jesus' teachings, which were in opposition to existing customs and practices, found happiness in Luke's gospel. For example, reciprocity was the expectation of all of those who extended hospitality to others. However, Jesus taught the people to extend hospitality with no expectation of reciprocity; thereby, he enabled, and indeed expected, people to extend hospitality to the poor, the crippled, and the lame who could never return their gifts of hospitality.

The manner in which Paul found happiness also denied the conventions of his day, according to Colleen Shantz. Culturally speaking, happiness was usually found in personal honor in Paul's day. Before meeting Christ, Paul found his honor in his ethnicity as an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin and in being a Pharisee. He found honor in living a life of righteousness in the eyes of God. However, once he met Christ, he found honor in circumstances that would be considered humiliating in the dominant culture. Though he was imprisoned, beaten, and persecuted for Christ, Paul found happiness, or at least contentment, in the knowledge that by sharing in Christ's sufferings he was advancing the kingdom of God. By accepting his fate, he accepted the inevitability of physical death and no longer feared it. He instead looked forward to life after death with Christ.

In her response to the Hebrew Bible and New Testament essays on behalf of systematic theology, Ellen Charry spends time recounting the evolution of the doctrine of divine passibility (God's ability to experience emotion). Thomas Aquinas believed that God could not experience emotion because divine emotion breached the rule of divine immutability (God's inability to

change). However, impassibility ignores the biblical depictions of God who is emotionally moved by the predicaments of human existence. Though Karl Barth wrote of a God who was self moved, it was Jurgen Moltmann who contended that Christ's sufferings were God's own. Charry contends that theologians fail to understand that if God experiences human sufferings, God can also experience human joy and happiness. It would be difficult for humans to trust God if God could not celebrate a flourishing creation.

One criticism of this work is about the Eurocentric orientation of it. It appeals to Greek philosophy for a definition of happiness. Many of the scholars rely heavily on Eurocentric scholarship as their conversation partners. For example, Carl Holiday, in his essay "Happiness and the Kingdom of God" chose to end his essay by engaging the writings of the "church fathers" on the beatitudes rather than taking the opportunity to engage a number of liberation, womanist and feminist theologians who have written about the kingdom of God in particular and eschatology in general. Out of thirteen essays, only one is written by a scholar of color.

The strengths of this work are many. The writings of biblical scholars challenge readers to re-read biblical texts and perhaps to see God differently than they ever have. In addition to seeing God differently, this book causes readers to understand that if God is happy and desires for all of creation to be happy, people of God must not only seek their own happiness, but must diligently work for the happiness of others as well. The responses of scholars of other disciplines broadens the conversation to demonstrate ways that conceiving of God and the bible with happiness in mind has far reaching implications for fields such as systematic theology, practical theology, and counseling psychology. This book is a must read for all of those who preach and teach the bible.

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