

The Quest for a Good Life in Times of Crisis

Hopeful Happiness in the New Testament and Beyond

By Assistant Professor, Dr.theol. Daniel Christian Maier



The texts that form the New Testament today were originally all written in Greek, the lingua franca of their time in the Mediterranean. This fact is not surprising given the vast influence Hellenization had in the aftermath of the conquest of Alexander the Great on nearly all aspects of life in the occupied territories and beyond. Among the new ideas that came with it were the ongoing debates about the concept of *eudaimonia*, which can be roughly translated as happiness or well-being, and how this state can be achieved.

Various sources from Second Temple Judaism attest to how Hellenistic ideas about the good life were integrated, transformed, debated, or rejected in their theology and anthropology. Naturally, the followers of the early Jesus movement were confronted with similar questions about the role of happiness in light of the events of Jesus' ministry, his resurrection, and the expectation of Christ's Second Coming.

New Assistant Professor of New Testament

In August 2023, I began my position as Assistant Professor of New Testament at

the Theological Faculty in Copenhagen. Among the aspirations for my new role is to bring the ancient negotiation of what defines a good life and what the divine plan foresees for human well-being to the attention of my students.

The study of happiness always fascinated me. Already in school, I had a profound interest in the theological, philosophical, and psychological approaches to this topic. Therefore, it was only consequential that I included this topic when choosing a field of research to deeply interact with during my dissertation at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich. While Hellenistic literature has been extensively explored for its perspectives on happiness, other sources from Antiquity remain underexamined in this context.

As a result, I spent nearly four years studying the concepts of a good life in Ancient Judaism and their influence on the early Christian perception of happiness. During those years, I had the great privilege of devoting countless hours to contemplating happiness as understood in the past and present while learning on multiple levels from colleagues, especially during my guest research stays

at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Addis Ababa University, and Yale University.

Happiness in Ancient Judaism

The Book of Jubilees is one example of bringing happiness into a dialogue with religious traditions that captivated me from the beginning of my research. This intriguing work, dating back to the 2nd century BCE and only fully extant today in Old Ethiopic (Ge'ez), offers a unique retelling of events from Genesis and the first chapters of Exodus, but with its own twists and variations. It is remarkable how the author(s) of Jubilees harmoniously integrated more than 40 references to happiness and joy into their *Rewritten History*, whose *Vorlage* in the Torah did not treat these topics explicitly.

Whether it is about the gratitude of Abraham, the good death of the patriarchs, the end of a mourning period, the joy of humans eating and drinking together, or the instructions given to the reader for the correct way to celebrate ritual feast days with genuine happiness; in Jubilees, we encounter a wide range of descriptions of positive mindsets, which exist predominantly in connection with God and invite the recipients to be emulated. The message is clear: A state of flourishing is only possible through a meaningful relationship with God since he is the creator of all human happiness, and therefore deserves unconditional gratitude, as Jubilees frequently affirms.

Philo and Josephus

A different stance on the pursuit of happiness is taken by Philo of Alexandria (ca.

20 BCE–50 CE). Deeply immersed in both Hellenistic philosophy and his Jewish heritage, Philo grappled with questions of how to communicate the promise of happiness within the Hebrew Bible to his fellow Jews, who were partly inclined to abandon the traditions of the fathers. The product is a unique synthesis of Hellenistic virtue ethics with Torah exegesis evident in his works. He highlights wisdom, piety, and philanthropy as virtues exemplified by biblical figures like Abraham and Moses, portraying them as eternal pathways to lasting happiness.

Another critical aspect of Philo's thought was the relationship between spiritual and physical needs. However, unlike modern interpretations emphasizing harmony, Philo stresses that obeying reason and law over bodily desires was paramount for obtaining the good life. In sum, this Alexandrian explicitly designates ascetic contemplation and strict virtue as ways to achieve happiness.

Flavius Josephus (ca. 37–100 CE), a Jewish historian working in Rome after the First Jewish–Roman War, offers a more pragmatic perspective on happiness than most of his contemporaries. Unlike the detailed and (allegedly) reliable paths to happiness suggested by others, Josephus views happiness as elusive and transient, a gift from God not fully comprehensible to humans. His motivation for discussing happiness in his work is practical, using it to bring back hope to fellow Jews among his readers after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by showing that happiness is also possible without a temple. He encourages adherence to Jewish laws and virtues since

they provide the best chances to happiness akin to their revered ancestors.

Josephus also employs happiness as a diplomatic tool, portraying the laws of Moses as the ultimate source for a happy society to his pagan readership while defending his people against widespread anti-Jewish stereotypes. Thereby, his approach underscores the diverse perspectives on happiness within Ancient Judaism.

The New Testament

Many concepts of happiness found within the New Testament are similar to those they encountered in their environment. Therefore, they are easier to understand in light of this context. This is exemplified in Paul's letters, where he proclaims hope, even amidst adversities, and views authentic joy as a proper disposition before God. The demand for genuine happiness when approaching God became increasingly prominent in Ancient Judaism.

But not only Jewish influences shaped the apostle's concept of the good life. Paul's epistles, especially his letter to the Philippians, encourage believers to strive for the succession of Christ in terms that remarkably resemble the Aristotelian Eudaimonism, the highest good humans could strive toward. But while the Hellenistic concept entails happiness as the final goal, this happiness is, for Paul, subsumed under the meaningful journey to follow Christ in this life.

The Gospel of Luke and the Johannine tradition also partly build on ancient Jewish and Hellenistic discourses about happiness but alter them in significant ways.

Luke portrays joy as an essential part of faith and revelation, advocating for a present experience of happiness within the threatened communities. As the end of the Gospel illustrates, *great joy* is the theological answer to Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

Meanwhile, the Johannine tradition, particularly the Gospel of John, introduces the concept of "complete joy" achieved through a deep relationship with Jesus and adherence to his commandments. By remaining in Jesus' love and sustaining this love in the community, participation in a new form of divine happiness is possible. In contrast, the later First Johannine Epistle depicts "complete joy" as more elusive, linking it to an eschatological future. This shift also exemplifies the ongoing negotiation of happiness in early Christian thought.

Promises of Happiness

Some approaches to happiness mark a significant departure from previous customs. The beatitudes, particularly those in the Sermons on the Mount and Plain, present happiness as accessible to all by promising it to those who mourn and are meek, to the poor and persecuted, extending God's grace to the marginalized. This inclusive view stands in contrast to the more exclusive concepts of happiness found in Jewish and Hellenistic *makarisms*, which often tied calling someone *makarios* (traditionally representing the happy state of the Gods) to virtues, honor, or social standing. In this new paradigm, happiness is not only a future promise but also an immediate experience. It suggests that the hope for divine

fulfillment itself brings happiness in the present, bridging the gap between the now and the not-yet.

Overall, while the Hellenistic and ancient Jewish fundamentals are clearly perceivable, the New Testament reshapes the concept of happiness, emphasizing its inclusivity and immediacy. At various significant points, it moves away from traditional paradigms, offering a vision of joy rooted in hope, love, and the transformative teachings of Jesus, setting the foundation for the diverse Christian understandings of happiness. It is a happiness that the creator has intended for his creation, and he lets humanity participate if it leads a life guided by him.

Thus, the ideas of happiness in the New Testament share a common language describing a loving God who, through revealing the ways to the good life, expresses his will that humanity should be happy. And this is truly *Good News*.

Outlook: The Role of Hope

After concluding my dissertation on happiness in 2020, I had the opportunity to spend three years in Zürich as a Postdoc working on Early Christian apocalyptic texts. While, at first glance, happiness and revelatory literature disclosing transcendent realities appear worlds apart, a common thread emerged: hope.

For many early Christians, the hope for a radical transformation of the world in a dire situation enabled them to rejoice even when faced with prosecution and death. Nowhere is this so tangible as in apocalyptic texts of the time where this hope is unmistakably proclaimed.

Thus, the Apocalypse of John envisions a Heavenly Jerusalem where “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Rev 21:4). Similarly, the Apocalypse of Peter, which did not become part of the canon but enjoyed great appreciation in early Christian circles, transmits hope to its recipients by emphasizing the mercy of God and outlining the paradise awaiting the deceased.

As I transition into my new role here in Copenhagen, I want to dive deeper into the parallels between the early Christians’ hope as a response to adversity and the multifaceted crises of our contemporary world. The project I am embarking upon seeks to analyze these ancient responses to draw comparisons between the hope articulated in early Christian texts and the forms of hope that emerge amidst the complexities of modern society. This comparative study is not merely an academic exercise but also an endeavor to understand how the timeless insights encapsulated in early Christian texts can inform and shape our contemporary quest for happiness, resilience, and meaning in uncertain times.

The rich tapestry of Christian hope from Antiquity provides a fertile ground for exploring the nuanced dimensions of human experience. As I further integrate into my new academic home, I am eager to engage in discourses that not only illuminate the historical and theological underpinnings of these texts but also provoke thought on their relevance in addressing the existential quests of our time to enable hope to prevail as it has so many times before.