

### "Happy" in the Psalms

One of the great privileges in my life was the opportunity to write a commentary on the Psalms. It happened by happenstance (as the Book of Ruth would say!). The late Professor S. Edward Tesh, beloved OT professor at Lincoln Christian Seminary, in his twilight years, had written Volume One of a commentary on Psalms based on the KJV. College Press asked me to edit that volume for the NIV and then write Volume Two. It would have been easier to write from "scratch," but the experience was well worth it. Volume Two was written reflecting the latest Psalm scholarship, and particularly the work of Gerald H. Wilson, who single-handedly changed Psalm scholarship for this generation since the publication of his doctoral dissertation--*Editing the Hebrew Psalter*.<sup>1</sup> I heard him deliver a paper at one of the SBL meetings on the use of *ashre* in the Psalms. It was only a probing paper but it was intriguing. I was communicating with him at the time, for he was working on Volume Two of the NIV Application Commentary series while I was finishing my Volume Two for College Press. Professor Wilson died suddenly of a heart attack. His last book was published posthumously--*Job*.<sup>2</sup> In my correspondence with him he was going to finish Volume Two and then pick up his interest in the study of *ashre* in the Psalms. No one to my knowledge has picked up his mantle to do so. Acknowledging my gratitude and indebtedness to the late Dr. Wilson for his work, I will attempt to probe this simple thought of "'Happy' in the Psalms."

אֲשֶׁרִי *ashre* (this transliteration used for convenience) is usually considered a masculine, plural, construct form from the noun *`eshet* (this noun form not found in the Hebrew MT), meaning "O the happiness(es) of." It is interpreted as an interjection.<sup>3</sup> Others suggest "bliss" as a better translation.<sup>4</sup> Gerald Janzen discovered in his study of *ashre* that it is not the "antithesis to the cry of woe, *hoy*, 'Ah! Alas!'"<sup>5</sup> Neither, Janzen revealed, was it ever used with reference to God. The word is never on God's lips to refer to man or to Himself. When one "blesses" God or God "blesses" man, *barak* is used, not *ashre*. *Ashre* is used 44 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, 26 times in the Psalms.<sup>6</sup>

The word is usually followed by a noun such as in Psalm 1:1--"Happy the man who . . ." On one occasion in the psalms it has a suffix in Psalm 128:2--"your happiness(es)" (see Deut 33:29; Isa 32:20; Eccles 10:17). Twice in a late psalm it is used with the shortened form of the relative *v*, (*she*)—"Happy [is] he who . . ." (Psalm 137:8, 9).

Wilson's great contribution to psalm studies was the recognition that the Psalter as a whole had a wisdom framework with a royal framework within: Psalm 1, 73, 90, 107, and 145 (wisdom psalms) wrap around the royal framework (Psalm 2, 72, 89, and

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *Job*, New International Biblical Commentary, Hendrickson, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Cazelles, *TDOT*, vol. 1, p. 445.

<sup>4</sup> V.P. Hamilton, *TWBOT*, vol. 1, p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Cazelles, *TDOT*, vol. 1, p. 445; see W. Janzen, "'Asre' in the OT," *Harvard Theological Review*, 58 (1965), 215-226.

<sup>6</sup> See Deut 33:29; 1 Kgs 10:8<sup>2</sup>; 2 Chr 9:7<sup>2</sup>; Job 5:17; Prov 3:13; 8:32; 8:34; 14:21; 16:20; 20:7; 28:14; Eccles 10:17; Isa 30:18; 32:20; 56:2; Dan 12:12. The 26 times in the Psalms will be used in the text above.

144). This idea was developed by studying the “seams” of the five books of the psalms and by recognizing the first two untitled psalms in Book One to be *introductory* to the entire Psalter while the last five “Hallelujah” psalms served as its conclusion. The first psalm begins with the word *ashre* which clearly begins what we would call a “wisdom” psalm about the “two ways.” The second psalm (a royal psalm) ends with the word *ashre*, which seems to serve as an inclusion for the “introductory” psalms—binding them together. In Wilson’s unfinished Psalm commentary (lament!) he wrote:

[P]salms reflecting wisdom concerns, themes, and vocabulary appear in significant locations within the Psalter, giving rise to the idea that they were purposefully placed to provide a structuring framework to the whole Psalter. It is probably no accident that Psalm 1 stands at the beginning of the Psalter as an introduction. Neither is it coincidental, in my view, that wisdom concerns appear in Psalm 73, at the beginning of Book 3 of the Psalter, in Psalm 90 at the beginning of Book 4, and in Psalms 107 (vv. 41-43) and 145 (an alphabetic acrostic) at beginning and end of Book 5.<sup>7</sup>

In light of Wilson’s statements above, we can observe that *ashre*, a wisdom word, can be found at the seams of the books: Ps 41:1 (the end of Book 1); Ps 89:15 (the end of Book 3); Ps 106:3 (the end of Book 4) and Ps 144:15 (twice used toward the end of Book 5, but within the “royal” psalm as are most of the others except for Ps 106:3). It should be noted that *ashre* is used for the first of the “Hallelujah” psalms for the conclusion of the Psalter (Ps 146:5). The distribution of *ashre* throughout the five books are as follows: Book 1 (8); Book 2 (1); Book 3 (4); Book 4 (2); Book 5 (11). *Ashre* seems to be unevenly spread in the Psalter, but considering the length of Book 5, the word is evenly distributed except for Book 2 which is closely bound to Book 1 as part of an early David collection (see Ps 72:20—“This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.”). These two books contain the largest number of individual laments which is to be expected from the hand of David and his early life.

Given the arguments thus far, and having looked at all the 26 references to *ashre* used in the Psalter, I discovered that “happiness” is a by-product of something one does and includes the choices one makes. Psalms 1 and 2, of course, set the tone as one discovers that “happiness” comes by the good choice of not “walk[ing] in the counsel of the wicked or stand[ing] in the way of sinners or sit[ting] in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:1-2). This coincides with the idea of “happiness” being “bliss.” It is a “delight” to meditate on God’s instruction. The “doing” here is the study of God’s Word. Psalm 2 concludes with an ambiguous thought: “Happy [are] all taking refuge in him.” The “him” could be the “Son,” the newly anointed and exalted Son-King, or Yahweh, the King Himself. (It is unfortunate that the NIV uses “blessed” to translate *ashre*. It is best to use “blessed” for *barak* instead of *ashre*. The English student would not know the difference. Using “happy,” or “blissful,” or perhaps “fortunate” would be best for *ashre* as it refers to the human being, and particularly God’s people.) A review of the 26 references in Psalms will reveal the source for “happiness” and its logical consequences.

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<sup>7</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms* Volume 1, The NIV Application Commentary, (Zondervan, 2002), p. 74.

“Happy [is] the nation whose God is Yahweh, the people he chose for his inheritance” (Ps 33:12). Israel would have been like all other nations had they not been chosen by God. To be “chosen” is to have Yahweh as their God and thus to be “happy.” Yahweh God is the true source of the “good” life. Within the chosen people of God are other chosen ones such as priests and kings: “Happy [is the one] you choose and bring near; he dwells in your courts” (Ps 65:5, my translation). Psalm 144 is a Davidic psalm praising God for great victories and prosperity as a result. Thus the psalm concludes: “[Happy] are the people of whom this is true; [happy] are the people whose God is the LORD” (Ps 144:15 NIV, but using “happy” instead of “blessed”). Happiness begins with Yahweh.

Since the Torah came from Yahweh, happiness is meditating on this revelation (as already discussed above—Ps 1:1). The huge Torah Psalm 119 which comes to us in an eight line acrostic (each section beginning with the same Hebrew letter for eight lines) emphasizes the same thought as Psalm 1:1: “[Happy] are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. [Happy] are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart” (Ps 119:1, 2). It is clear that obedience to God’s Word is essential to happiness. But what if one falls short of continuing obedience which we all do?

“[Happy] is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law” (Ps 94:12). Teaching and discipline go hand in hand and is used as synonymous terms in this verse. Discipline may seem harsh at first but in the end it brings happiness (see Heb 12:7-11).

“[Happy] is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. [Happy] is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit” (Ps 32:1, 2). Having Yahweh as one’s God means that one has been given revelation of His will and when that is disobeyed discipline is in order. Beyond that, sometimes, only “forgiveness” will do. Having such a compassionate and loving God motivates one to flee to this God for refuge.

Taking refuge in Yahweh God is an act of trust. (Ps 2:12 has already set the agenda!) In Psalm 34, an acrostic psalm, the psalmist challenges the reader: “Taste and see that the LORD is good; [happy] is the man who takes refuge in him” (Ps 34:8). “[Happy] is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods” (Ps 40:4 [5]). The source of all true happiness comes from fleeing to God for refuge and strength. “[Happy] are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. [Happy] are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage” (Ps 84:4, 5). Here the psalmist is envious of those who serve in the temple as priest, for they are always praising God. Now the psalmist wants to be part of the group who will journey to Jerusalem to worship at one of the festivals required by the law. This same psalmist concludes: “O LORD Almighty, [happy] is the man who trusts in you” (Ps 84:12). “[Happy] is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God” (Ps 146:5). The ordinary word for “hope” (*tiqvah*) is not used in the parallel phrase here. Rather, it is a “hope” (*seber*) with the idea of searching and expectancy, eyes looking in hope for sustenance.<sup>8</sup> Yahweh fulfills what he promises.

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<sup>8</sup> Koehler-Baumgartner, *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Volume 3, (Brill, 1996), pp. 1304-05.

"[Happy] are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O LORD" (Ps 89:15 [16]). The word "acclaim" is the "festal shout," the *teru'ah*. Learning to worship the One True God, Yahweh, in the acceptable way is a source of happiness. If one loves to worship God it is because he or she has learned the wisdom of fearing God at all times (a reverential fear): "[Happy] is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands" (Ps 112:1). The second part of this parallelism reminds us of the very first psalm: "but his delight is in the law of the LORD" (Ps 1:2a). "[Happy] are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways" (Ps 128:1). The second part of this parallelism reminds us of Ps 119:1--"who walk according to the law of the LORD."

Those who love Yahweh and his Word, who find refuge and strength by trusting him, who learn to fear and worship him, who accept discipline as well as forgiveness from his hand, also seek justice for all. "[Happy] is he who has regard for the weak; the LORD delivers him in times of trouble" (Ps 41:1). God is always concerned for the poor and thus makes us "happy" when we respond to their needs. "[Happy] are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right" (Ps 106:3). Concern for what is right and fair for all should be the characteristic of God's people, for that is a characteristic of Yahweh God himself. Retributive justice is part of this idea of fairness and Hebrew wisdom literature is filled with it (see Proverbs; Job [his three friends]; Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations). When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, its temple, and exiled its people, the priests cried out for "retributive" justice in what we call a "cursing" psalm: "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us--[happy] he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (Ps 137:8, 9). Holocaust victims can understand this sentiment! (Note: This is the only text where the NIV used the word "happy" instead of "blessed." Curious.)

We cap this review with two references close together but in two different psalms. The first expresses the fortunate person who has many sons: "[Happy] is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate" (Ps 127:5). This text has been interpreted in two different ways. 1) It is the court room scene at the city gate and the sons testify on behalf of their father who is on trial by his enemies; 2) It is warfare metaphor where many sons help defend against enemies in the gate. The latter seems to be the best. The second reference has the context of "fear[ing] the LORD" and "walk[ing] in his ways" (Ps 128:1). As a result one will experience the following: "You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours" (Ps 128:2). Literally, this verse reads: "Toil of your hands that shall you eat--[it is] your happinesses and good to you." When we put God first in all things, God blesses us with food, family, and fun! That's the way it ought to be.

It is clear from these texts and their contexts that "happiness" is not something we should seek as a goal in life. Rather, when we live oriented toward Yahweh God and his revealed Word we experience a completely different worldview from others who do not believe in this God. Thus, the by-product is "happiness" based on our actions and our choices we make in life--to trust, worship, and fear Yahweh and His Son. We find our refuge in him. When we stray from this way, we are disciplined but we can find forgiveness. A life of justice and care for others is a large part of this lifestyle. Peace and "happiness" will come only when we make such choices and determine our actions in

conformity with God's will and word (see Lev 20:23; Deut 18:9-14). Our Christian faith is experiencing a clash of world-views within our country. Let us be "happy" in the Psalms and live the counter-cultural life.

What are the implications of the placement of *ashre* in the Psalter? As suggested earlier, *ashre* is used in Psalm 1 and 2 as an inclusion for the introductory psalms. In Psalm 1 "happiness" is based on Torah study while in Psalm 2 it is seeking refuge in the "Son," who has been elevated as "king" on Mount Zion. The "wisdom" and "royal" framework of the psalter is thus established. *Ashre* is used at the beginning of Psalm 41, the last psalm of Book 1. Psalm 73 is the reversal of Psalm 1, that is, what if the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? This is how Book 3 begins. Book 3 ends with the "failure" of the Davidic dynasty with Psalm 89, but *ashre* is used in that Psalm for those who have learned to worship properly: "Happy are those who have learned to acclaim (the festal shout) you, who walk in the light of your presence, O LORD." Again, at the beginning of Book 4 is a "wisdom" psalm (Psalm 90). Verse 12 says: "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." This same idea can be found at Psalm 94:15 where *ashre* is found at the beginning of the strophe: "Happy is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law" (v. 12). At the end of Book 4 is *ashre*: "Happy are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right" (Psalm 106:3). While *ashre* is scattered throughout Book 5 (see Psalm 112:1; 119:1, 2; 127:5; 128:1, 2; and 137:8, 9), it is emphasized at the end of the "royal" psalm, Psalm 144:15: "Happy are the people of whom this is true; happy are the people whose God is the LORD." The acrostic Psalm 145 closes out the "wisdom" framework of the entire psalter. The "Hallelujah" psalms (Psalms 146-150) are used to conclude the entire psalter and I do not think it is by accident that the very first "hallelujah" psalm (Psalm 146) has *ashre* in it: "Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—the LORD, who remains faithful forever" (vv. 5-6).

Just as the "word study" on *ashre* above reveals that "happiness" is a byproduct of making the right choices and doing the right things, so we discover that *ashre* is used to structure the psalms in such a way that the "wisdom" of knowing God as a refuge and his Torah as a source of wisdom is how one can be "happy" in the Psalms. More meditation should be done!