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Reflections on Joy in the Bible

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## Reflections on Joy in the Bible<sup>1</sup>

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In studying the topic of joy in the Scriptures, several methodological challenges immediately present themselves. Perhaps the most pressing of them concerns the proper entry point for such a study. The most direct way into the topic would seem to be through a word or words for “joy.” But which word or words? Should the net be cast broadly to include any and all passages in which one finds the ideas of joy, gladness, blessedness, celebration, and the like, or somewhat more narrowly, focusing perhaps on passages that include particular words?<sup>2</sup> Should we identify key words in the Hebrew or Greek through which to investigate our subject or begin with the English translations and work backwards?<sup>3</sup> Do we start with an idea of what joy is and include all passages that seem to flesh out our prior understanding, whether or not words related to “joy” actually appear in them?

In this paper we will use the Greek word *chara* (“joy”) and cognates as the lens through

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<sup>1</sup>Translations here and throughout are taken from the NRSV, unless noted otherwise.

<sup>2</sup>Joy and happiness are sometimes distinguished, typically by noting that while the Bible promises joy, it does not promise (the more fleeting) happiness. The NRSV uses “happiness” once in its translation (Lam 3:17), where the Hebrew has *ṭōbâ* “good things, goodness, happiness” as does the LXX (*agatha*, “good things”). But see now the collection of essays, *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life*, ed. by Brent A. Strawn; (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). The appendix, “A Biblical Lexicon of Happiness,” pp. 323-370, a far-ranging compilation of terms related to “happiness” and “the good life,” includes words such as “encourage” (*parakaleō*), “love, like, kiss” (*phileō*), “eat one’s fill” (*chortazō*), and “satisfy” (*empiplēmi*). The essays related to the NT (on the beatitudes, Luke-Acts, Paul, and apocalyptic literature) include particular discussion of passages that speak of being “blessed” or “happy” (*makarios*). Hence, the coverage and approach are somewhat different from that taken here.

<sup>3</sup>The difficulties in limiting or selecting passages for examination can be illustrated by Psalm 126:2, which in the NRSV reads, “our mouth was filled with *laughter*” (MT *šēḥôq*), but in the LXX (125:2) “our mouth was filled with joy” (*eplēsthē charas to stoma hēmōn*). We might not consider “joy” a good translation for “laughter,” but the translator of the LXX apparently saw some appropriate nuance here; the earliest Christians who read their Bible in Greek would have read “joy” at this point. Presumably “laughter” and “joy” might be related; but we would not collapse the two, and we could surely distinguish the causes of laughter from the causes of joy.

which to focus our work.<sup>4</sup> There are good reasons for such a choice. The word is important in the NT. Luke uses it in speaking of the “great joy” that comes through the gift of salvation in Christ (*charan megalēn*; Luke 2:10; cf. 24:52; Acts 15:3). In the farewell discourse of John, Jesus speaks frequently of the full or perfect joy that he will give the disciples (15:11, 16:20-24, 17:13). Paul uses the term often, and he includes joy in a definition of the kingdom of God (Rom. 14:17) and in his list of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Indeed, the word and its cognates appear several dozen times throughout the NT. But, curiously, “joy” (*chara*) seldom occurs in the Psalms or prophets or, for that matter, in the LXX as a whole. Perhaps the book of Isaiah provides the most interesting data on that score. As is well known, Isaiah speaks frequently of the rejoicing that accompanies the coming age of salvation. But in the Septuagint of Isaiah the word *chara* itself is rare (e.g. Isa. 39:2, LXX only; 55:12, 66:10). The more frequent, often paired, words translated “joy and gladness” typically render the Greek *euphrosynēn kai agalliamā* (e.g., Isa. 51:3).<sup>5</sup>

In this paper I identify three patterns or clusters of texts in the Bible that relate to human expressions of gladness, rejoicing, and joy. Taken together, these patterns help us to sketch the Biblical witness to what we call “joy.” The first cluster of biblical texts describes human response to a variety of occasions or events, such as friendship or a wedding or tasting good food, in terms of joy, gladness, singing or shouting for joy, or rejoicing. There is a good way that human beings respond to the good things of life; in turn, these various things are known as

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<sup>4</sup>In his book *Joy in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), William Morrice discusses the following word groups in the NT: *agallian, euthymein, euphrainein, hēdonē, tharsein, hilaros, kauchasthai, makarios, skirtan, chairein, synchairein*. Morrice assigns to each a nuance of meaning (exultant joy, optimism, good cheer, pleasure, courage, hilarity, and the like). His study underscores, rather than addresses or resolves, the methodological question we are raising here: what should count as evidence to understand “joy”? Apparently because Morrice’s subject is joy in the New Testament, he investigates other Greek literature, including the LXX, but does not take the Hebrew into account. In this study, I have not considered words or ideas such as *hēdonē* (“pleasure”), *tharsein* (“to be courageous”), *kauchasthai* (“to boast”), or some of the others in Morrice’s list, nor have I considered many of the terms in the “lexicon” in *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*.

<sup>5</sup>But the pattern is not consistent in the LXX or in the translations of other books. 65 times in the LXX *euphrosynē* translates *šimḥā*; *chara* appears for *šimḥā* 6 times; *agalliamā*, 3 times. *euphrosynē* also translates several others words, but none so frequently as *simchah*. This analysis could be made more precise by noting that the patterns vary in different books of the LXX to render underlying Hebrew roots. For example, the translator(s) of the Psalms used *euphrainesthai* for *šimḥā* and *agalliaisthai* for *rānan*; but in Isaiah, *euphrainesthai* is used for the Hebrew *rānan* and *agalliaisthai* is used for *gīl*. In Stoicism, joy (*chara*) belongs to the right sensibilities (*eupatheiai*), along with volition (*boulēsis*) and precaution (*eulabeia*), that are part of the rightly ordered emotional life (Plutarch, *Virt. Mor.* 449B). Diogenes Laertes describes the Stoic understanding of joy as follows: “Joy (*chara*), the counterpart [or, opposite] of pleasure, is rational elation” (DL 7.116).

good because they elicit this response of rejoicing.

In a second group of texts, joy is contrasted to sorrow, grieving, affliction, distress and the like. Joy (eventually) replaces these other responses, actions, or emotions; or, perhaps better, joy comes because those things that lead to sorrow, those things that cause grief and distress, are removed or taken away. Joy is often anticipated and hoped for as people await those events and circumstances that turn mourning into rejoicing and celebrating. Perhaps most notable is the joy that is anticipated and expected when God acts to redeem and restore his people. This understanding of joy as the appropriate response to God's saving acts, following a period of sorrow or affliction, dominates the pages of the OT.

Yet a third trajectory may also be found in the Scriptures, and more particularly in the NT, although the groundwork is laid for it by the eschatological hopes voiced in the prophets. Here, joy (*chara*) is not the experience of elation and celebration that follows affliction and distress, but rather that disposition manifested in the midst of affliction and distress. This joy is or provides a deeply grounded sense of well being in the present world, even when things in the present world do not seem to be going especially well.

If the first two set of texts show rejoicing or joy that arises from certain circumstances or events, a *joy because* of the good that one has or experiences, the third kind of joy or rejoicing is a *joy notwithstanding* one's condition, state, or circumstances, joy when one's circumstances seem not to warrant it. But those who have joy even in the midst of distress and affliction have reasons for joy; they are neither sadochistic nor masochistic nor glib. In the Scriptures, the person who has *joy notwithstanding* his or her circumstances has faith that suffering and affliction do not signal the absence of God from life or the world. *Joy notwithstanding* also looks forward in hope anticipating the action of God to remove all affliction and tribulation, when the inhabitants of the earth will sing with everlasting joy, because God will have brought about the conditions for it.

### **“Joy” in the Scriptures: A closer look**

*“The trees clap their hands,”* First, and briefly, we note a set of texts in which joy, gladness, mirth and the like are the expected or natural human responses to a variety of occasions, such as festivals, worship, or other occasions associated with the temple activities (Num 10:10; 2 Sam 6:12; 1 Chr 15:16; Ezra 3:12-13; Eccl 10:19), the naming of a king (1 Kgs 1:40), weddings (Jer 25:10), wine (Judg 9:13; Ps 104:15; Eccl 10:19),<sup>6</sup> a good word (Prov 12:25), wise offspring (Prov 15:20), or seeing a friend or relative (Exod 4:14). All such occasions and objects are good things, and in such times or in response to such occasions, people are glad. They rejoice. Perhaps to be included here are those passages where the natural creation – the sun, the pastures and meadows – act or sing with joy (Ps 19:5; 65:12-13).<sup>7</sup> In response to

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<sup>6</sup>But heed the warning of Eccl 2:3, where such enjoyments are deemed foolishness!

<sup>7</sup>In Isaiah, the trees rejoice because God has struck down the wicked. As a result, the

the creator or sovereign God, the natural world responds in joy, even as elsewhere creation is said to do the bidding of the Lord.<sup>8</sup> This response of rejoicing, of singing with joy and gladness, demonstrates that the proper (even “natural”) disposition of the world ought to be (and is) that of joy.

There is also in the Scriptures a related, but somewhat different emphasis, namely, that there is joy in the presence of God. In Nehemiah one finds the memorable statement, “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). The structure of the passage suggests that “joy of the Lord”<sup>9</sup> probably refers to the human experience and expression of rejoicing (“joy occasioned by the Lord”), since rejoicing is the opposite of weeping. The fact that the day is “holy to our LORD” that should occasion “great rejoicing” (Neh. 8:10-12). The note is sounded in the Psalms. The Psalmist prays, “Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!” and follows that petition with the exclamation, “You have put gladness (*šimhâ*; *euphrosynēn*) in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound” (Ps 4:6-7).

While an abundance of the good things of the earth leads (rightly) to gladness, there is an experience of gladness, a kind of joy, that comes from God and exceeds that which is granted by the physical world. So also we read the words of the Psalmist: “in your presence there is fullness of joy” (16:11)<sup>10</sup> and “you make [the king] glad with the joy of your presence” (21:6). In both of these cases, “presence” translates the Hebrew word for face (*pāneh*; cf. Ps 4:7, “your face”). Here too the human experience of joy depends on God’s turning his face towards – that is,

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whole earth “is at rest and quiet . . . and the trees exult that ‘no one comes to cut us down’” (Isa 14:8). Is the point that in God’s “peaceable kingdom” there is no destruction of any kind of the natural order? Or no (implied?) misuse of the natural order?

<sup>8</sup>According to Sirach, the heavenly bodies “never disobey God’s word” (16:28). Or, again, Sirach speaks of the natural phenomena of wind, fire, hail, famine, and pestilence as serving the purposes of God: “They take delight in doing his bidding, always ready for his service on earth; and when their time comes they never disobey his command” (39:31; 43:5, 10). Thus the natural phenomena manifest that response to God that human beings ought to offer up. Perhaps the same is true with respect to joy and celebration. If the sun runs its course with joy, and the meadows and valleys shout and sing together for joy, ought not human beings to do so as well?

<sup>9</sup>Since the contents of the LXX do not precisely mirror the MT, there are two translations of Nehemiah 8:10 and hence of the phrase “the joy of the Lord” (*hedwat yhw*) Lord is your strength.” In both cases, the LXX understands God to be the active agent in bringing about joy or rejoicing.

<sup>10</sup>John Goldingay translates “joyful abundance will be with your face,” commenting, “When Yhw’s face shines on people, they experience great joy through Yhw’s abundant provision for their needs” (*Psalms, Vol. 1: Psalms 1-41* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 233).

looking favorably upon – a person (cf. Num. 6:25-26). God’s favor brings gladness. God brings gladness. God is not a passive observer of the joy of his people, nor even solely the object of their rejoicing, but the one who brings about that rejoicing and gladness. The author of 1 Chronicles states that honor, majesty, strength, glory, holy splendor, and “joy are in his place” (1 Chr. 16:27-29). Therefore, the heavens are to be glad, the earth is to rejoice, and the nations are to proclaim that the LORD is king (16:30-31). The trees “sing for joy” in the presence of the Lord who judges the earth.<sup>11</sup> “Joy” and “rejoicing” are not merely the “natural” response of the created order to their creator, but the results of the particular contours of God’s activity, namely, God’s gracious favor and God’s righteous judgment on the earth. It is not “the world” *per se* that occasions rejoicing, but God’s ordering of the world that does so. Thus the bounty of the world elicits joy. The children of Zion rejoice and are glad in the Lord their God because his vindication of them results in the return of the abundance of the land, fruit-bearing trees and vines, vats overflowing with wine and oil (Joel 2:2-24): God’s goodness manifests itself in the earth’s bounty that leads, in turn, to joy and gladness. And this leads us then to the second cluster of biblical texts.

“*Joy comes in the morning.*” In a number of biblical texts, joy and rejoicing are contrasted with sorrow, grieving, mourning, and the like. Hence we read in the Psalms, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (MT Ps. 30:6; MT: *rinnâ* (“ringing cry, jubilation,” LXX *agalliasis*). Later in the same Psalm, we read, “You have turned my mourning into dancing, and clothed me with joy” (MT Ps. 30:12, *šimhâ*; LXX 29:12, *euphrosynēn*). Weeping and mourning are replaced with dancing and joy; they are not experienced simultaneously. In Psalm 51, the penitent sinner prays, “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice” (51:8; *šāsôn wěšimhâ*; *agalliasin kai euphrosynēn*). In this prayer, the psalmist anticipates or hopes for a turn of events so that he will be able to rejoice. Indeed, he depends on God to act favorably so that he may rejoice. Thus he prays, “restore to me the joy of your salvation” (v. 12) He does not rejoice at present because his current distress is due to God’s punishment for his sin; thus he can only turn to God in repentance and beg God for relief. There can be no rejoicing for the Psalmist until God turns his face again towards the penitent (Ps. 51:9, 11-12), until God delivers him (v. 14). Indeed, in the present situation it would be inappropriate to rejoice, because the Psalmist suffers because of his own guilt and the just punishment of God. Thus he hopes for God’s deliverance and restoration, and trusts in God’s grace and kindness. So also when in captivity in Babylon, the exiles lay down and wept: they did not sing the songs of Zion (Ps. 137:1-4). Only when the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion, does one laugh, rejoice and shout for joy (Ps. 126:1-2; cf. Pss. 14:7; 40:16; 70:4; 90:14; 118:24; Isa. 9:3; 25:9; Matt. 5:12).

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<sup>11</sup>In 1 Chr. 16:27-31, the usual range and variety of Hebrew and Greek words are found, with one exception: in 1 Chr. 16:27, the LXX translates the Hebrew *hedwâ* (“joy”) as *kauchēma* (“boasting”). William Morrice defines *kauchasthai* as “joyful boasting,” and includes the word group in his study of joy in the New Testament, but his attachment of the adjective “joyful” to “boasting” arises from his theological reading that Paul’s is a proper boasting when contrasted to misdirected Jewish boasting.

Similarly, Isaiah describes the period of God's punishment, of exile, or of tyranny, evil or injustice, as a time characterized by the lack of joy, gladness, and rejoicing (16:10; 22:13; 24:11; 29:19-21; 35:1-2). Times of desolation are just that, and they are not characterized by joy or gladness; indeed, given that in the prophets these times are (often) brought about by God because of Israel's disobedience, it would be inappropriate to rejoice and be glad.<sup>12</sup> But when God breaks the yoke of the oppressor, the people rejoice (9:3). Acknowledging God's salvation, God's bringing just judgment upon the earth, and the presence of the Holy One of Israel among them, the people sing for joy (12:3, 6; cf. 24:14, 26:19, 29:19; 35:2, 6; cf. Zech. 2:10). Especially notable is Isaiah's repeated description of the return of the "ransomed of the Lord" to Zion: "everlasting joy" shall be on their heads (35:10; 51:11; 61:7). God will comfort Zion, and "joy and gladness" will be found in her (51:3). Isaiah's vision of the future includes the experience of joy and peace (55:12). And, finally, those who love Jerusalem are exhorted to rejoice and, indeed, to "rejoice with joy" or "rejoice greatly."<sup>13</sup>

As is the case with other books of the OT, the familiar NT word for joy or rejoice (*chara*, *chairō*) appears only rarely in the LXX of Isaiah. But Isaiah describes the response to God's activity of deliverance and restoration as that of rejoicing, anticipating its persistence by describing it as "everlasting joy." Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the realm of future wholeness and salvation can be pictured as marked by joy and peace, the state of affairs that corresponds to the time when God removes all causes of sorrow, wiping away every tear, and when the peoples beat their swords into plowshares. Isaiah would find it difficult to separate the "inner state of joy" from its "external expression," and both from the concrete act of salvation that has brought them about. The coming era of joy is a time of when people rejoice, that is, they offer thanksgiving and praise to God, to celebrate God's justice and deliverance of his people.

Thus however we might define joy, we note the striking fact that in the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments, God's actions are the cause of and reason for joy and rejoicing.<sup>14</sup> Even God joins in the rejoicing. "On that day" in which God restores "the remnant of Israel," removing the judgments passed against it, not only is Israel to rejoice, but the Lord himself "will

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<sup>12</sup>It is therefore also wrong for the wicked to rejoice because of the troubles of the righteous (Jdg. 16:23; Ps. 35:15) or to rejoice in foolishness (Prov. 15:21). Not only will such joy end, but inasmuch as it runs counter to God's purposes, it must end.

<sup>13</sup>The Greek word *chara* that figures so importantly in the NT is found in LXX Isa. 55:12 and 66:10 (*charēte chara*; 66:10). Elsewhere the word typically rendered joy in the NRSV is *euphrosynē* (35:10, 51:3, 11, and 61:7).

<sup>14</sup>According to 1QM, the army of God carries banners into war that read, among other things, "God's battle," "God's revenge," "God's lawsuit," and "God's might." When they return from battle, presumably victorious, their banners read, "God's acts of salvation," "God's victory," "God's help" and "God's joy" (1QM 4:12-14).

exult over you with joy” and “rejoice over you with loud singing” (Zeph. 3:16-7).<sup>15</sup> God celebrates his own acts of salvation by celebrating the people who have been saved. And by rejoicing in their deliverance, they are in turn both rejoicing in God’s act and sharing in God’s celebration of it. This rejoicing focuses on what God has done and on the changed situation of the one who has been delivered and who therefore rejoices, on the movement from judgment (of or by God) to deliverance (by God) from the consequences of that judgment. In the same vein, we read in Nehemiah that upon the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, the people “offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. The joy of Jerusalem was heard far away” (Neh. 12:43). Particularly interesting here is the verb “God had made them rejoice.” The point is that what God has done has led to their rejoicing: God’s action (of restoration, of deliverance) is the cause of their rejoicing. Similarly, but on an individual rather than corporate level, the Psalmist prays that God will restore the “joy of your salvation.”<sup>16</sup> Joy, or rejoicing, is the proper response to, and occasioned by, God’s saving activity.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly in the NT one finds the picture of the God who rejoices over the restoration and return of those who are brought into the realm of God’s salvation. In the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7), Jesus speaks of a shepherd who goes in search of one lost sheep, rejoices (*chairōn*) when he finds it, and calls his friends to rejoice with him (*syncharēte moi*), and then compares that shepherd’s joy to the “joy in heaven” (*chara en tō ouranō*) if one sinner repents. The same notes are sounded in the parable about the woman who lost but found one of her ten silver coins. In this parable, however, we read that there is joy “in the presence of the angels of God” (15:10). Those who are with God, who are in God’s presence, celebrate the finding of the lost. Even as God rejoices in his own action of delivering the exiles out of captivity, so the

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<sup>15</sup>In this passage, the words translated “joy” and “rejoice” come from *śimḥâ* and cognates, translated in the LXX with *euphrosynē* and cognates. Morrice notes, but does not develop, the point that the joy (*euphrosynē*) of God’s people “is matched by joy in the heart of God himself” (p. 27). The Jewish exegete and philosopher, Philo, wrote that “to rejoice belongs to God alone,” because God is free from grief, fear, and suffering, “the only nature that possesses complete happiness and blessedness” (*eudaimonias kai makaristētos*; *Abr.* 202). So also *Cher.* 86, where God alone rejoices because God alone is free from pain and fear, does not participate in evil, does not suffer sorrow or fatigue, and enjoys peace untainted by war. In other words, God now enjoys what human beings yearn for (*Cher.* 87).

<sup>16</sup>In Neh. 12:43, again the Greek words for joy and rejoicing again come from *euphrainō* and cognates, translating the Hebrew *śimḥâ* and cognates. In Ps. 51.12, the Greek word translated joy is *agalliasin*; the Hebrew is *śāśōn*. As noted previously, the NT word *chara* is rare in the LXX.

<sup>17</sup>One could perhaps quibble whether “the joy of salvation” refers to the joy one has in or because of God’s salvation or the joy that comes from that salvation. Given the fact that “salvation” requires an action of God, the difference between these types of genitives is rendered moot.

shepherd rejoices in his own action of finding what is his own, and invites others to celebrate with him; the woman rejoices in her own action of finding what is her own, and invites others to celebrate with her (15:10). But the appropriate response to God's expected deliverance is found already in the opening chapters of the Gospel. When the angel Gabriel informs Zechariah of the coming birth of John, he notes that Zechariah "will have joy and gladness" (*estai chara soi kai agalliasis*), and that many will rejoice (*charēsontai*) at John's birth (1:14).<sup>18</sup> This promise is magnified when a host of angels announce to the shepherds a "great joy" (*charan megalēn*) that will be for "all people" (*panti tō laō*).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the joy that characterizes God's response to the finding of the lost — their return to God and the people of God — ought to characterize the response of all people to that salvation. Not only do they receive the benefits of God's gracious deliverance, but they in doing so share God's own response to it.

This point is made in Matthew in the parable of the talents. When the master rewards the servants who have been "good and faithful" he invites them to "enter into the joy" of their master (*eiselthe eis tēn charan tou kyriou sou*; Matt. 25:21, 23). Is "the joy of your master" the joy that the master has, a personal joy ("I am joyful")? Or is it the kind of joy that the master can bring about or give ("I have joy for you")? It is interesting to substitute different words in the invitation to "enter into the joy" of the master. One could, for example, be invited to enter into the house, inheritance, family, or kingdom of the master. To enter into the "joy" of the master implies sharing the master's own response to something, the master's own elation. The master rejoices over the faithful; and in turn the faithful may rejoice – enter into the master's joy – as well.

"*Rejoice in the Lord always.*" This leads us, then, to the third trajectory found in the Scriptures. The future-looking hopes we identified as part of the second biblical cluster of texts regarding joy and rejoicing lay the groundwork for understanding joy as that attitude experienced or expressed in times of affliction and suffering. The word used here is typically, although not exclusively, *chara*, and its chief representative is Paul. To be sure, there are places in Paul where sorrow or grief stand in contrast to joy. For example, Paul writes to the Corinthians with the hope he will not have sorrow but joy (2 Cor. 2:3). Yet later in the same letter Paul speaks warmly of the abundance of joy manifested by the churches of Macedonia during "a severe ordeal of affliction," a joy that overflowed in generosity (2 Cor. 8:2; and cf. 2 Cor. 7:4-16). Those churches include the believers in Thessaloniki, whom Paul describes having "received the word

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<sup>18</sup>Jesus "rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" upon learning of the triumphs of the seventy as they returned from their mission (Luke 10:21); the early church met together, receiving their food "with rejoicing" (*en agalliasei*; cf. Luke 16:34). Defining *agalliasis* and various cognates as "exultant joy," Morrice speaks also of it as eschatological joy that can be anticipated in faith (Morrice, *Joy in the New Testament*, 23). That meaning belongs not to the word itself, but rather to the contexts in which it is used.

<sup>19</sup>It may be noted here that, whatever other words Luke uses, he does tend to prefer and use the common NT word for joy and its cognates, namely, *chara*. On the whole, this is the pattern of the NT, but not the LXX.

with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6), as well as the believers of Philippi.

The letter to the Philippians may be the Pauline epistle in which joy plays its most prominent role (1:4, 18, 25; 2:2, 17, 18, 28, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10). Although penned while he was imprisoned and uncertain about the outcome of his imprisonment and whether he would live or die, Paul here writes that even if he is “being poured out as a libation,” he remains glad and rejoices, and calls on the Philippians also to rejoice with him (2:17-18). Paul also exhorts them, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice” (4:4; cf. 3:1; 4:10). In the context of the letter, this exhortation is preceded by the famous “Christ-hymn” (2:5-11), in which Paul recounts the path of Jesus: he who was in the form of God emptied himself; humbled himself; and was obedient even unto death; it is this one whom God has exalted and honored. It is this Jesus whom Paul yearns to know, both to share in his sufferings even unto death and to experience the power of resurrection from the dead (3:10-11; Col. 1:24). To share in suffering is to share the very life of Christ. Elsewhere Paul also plots the course and significance of his own life along that of Jesus’ life, the one to whom he is joined in dying and rising, in life and in death (Rom. 6:3-11; 14:7-9; 2 Cor. 4:9-10).

Paul’s joy, then, is a joy *notwithstanding* the circumstances of his imprisonment and affliction, because he has faith that he is sharing in the sufferings of his Lord and hope that he will share in Christ’s resurrection. Even as Paul’s identity is now reconfigured by and through the one who loved him and gave himself for him (Gal. 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25), so Paul’s joy is occasioned by his participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. His conviction that he is joined to Christ in his suffering, and the hope that he will be joined to Christ in his resurrection, converge to give him joy in his present dismal circumstances. In that sense, joy *notwithstanding* is indeed a joy *because of*, that is, joy because Paul is joined precisely *in* his suffering to the Lord Jesus Christ who “will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory” (Phil. 3:21). In suffering and in vindication, in death and in life, “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom. 14:8).

Other authors of the NT also write of having joy in the midst of trials; indeed, even of the possibilities that trials produce joy. Notable in this regard are both the epistles of James and 1 Peter, with similar exhortations: “Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy” (James 1:2); “in this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials” (1 Peter 1:6). In both cases, it is the result in view that allows for joy in the present. The testing of faith brought about by trials of various sorts leads to endurance and maturity (Jas. 1:3-4), or to the manifestation of the genuineness of one’s faith, itself revealed finally in the outcome or result of that faith, namely, salvation (1 Pet. 1:6-9). There is joy not because one is afflicted, but because affliction can serve to test and establish one’s faithfulness, and that results, in the end, in salvation. The passage from 1 Peter also emphasizes the pointedly personal and finally inexpressible aspect of “joy.” Here the author addresses his readers by reminding them that although they have not seen Jesus Christ in the present, they love him and have faith in him, and “rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy” (*agallias the charai aneklalētōi kai dedoxasmenē*). They do so because they are anticipating their salvation, thus looking forward in hope, and that hope reaches back into the present to give “indescribable and

glorious joy.”

Especially the second and third Biblical trajectories discussed here are found in the Gospel of John. On the one hand, joy vanquishes sorrow; the two do not exist simultaneously. Anticipating his death and departure from the disciples, Jesus warns them that they will “weep and mourn” while the world rejoices, but then assures them that their sorrow will turn “into joy” (*eis charan*; 16:20) because they will see him again and, at that time, “no one will take your joy from you” (16:22). The warning about the disciples’ imminent sorrow and subsequent joy refer, in the first place, to responses to Jesus’ death and resurrection. The disciples will grieve and mourn because Jesus will be killed; they will rejoice when they see him, because that will indicate both that Jesus is alive and that he is now with the Father. He has completed his mission and returned to the Father who sent him. Not only may the disciples rejoice because Jesus’ mission has not been in vain, having in fact accomplished that which the Father has sent him to do, but because he has returned to the Father from whom he came and with whom he is one. His presence there insures his return to the disciples. But his presence there also insures his ongoing presence with the disciples. Their initial sorrow arises from Jesus’ absence; their joy is elicited by his presence.<sup>20</sup>

The joy of the disciples is described in distinctive terms as “fulfilled” (or “completed”) joy (15:11; 16:24; 17:13). As a result of their union with Christ, being joined to him as branches are to the vine, the disciples glorify God, abide in the love of the Father and Son, and keep their commandments. This way of living that begins with “abiding” in Christ, or in the love of the Father and the Son, issues in keeping the commandment to love. And that reality expresses itself further in joy (15:11). Furthermore, the union of the believer with Christ in and through his love is such that they receive what they ask for in order that their joy may be completed (16:24). The relationship of believers to the Father through the Son has as its destiny the full participation in the joy that he gives them. This is his own joy, the joy that comes from him and that characterizes the one who fully accomplishes the will of the Father. Furthermore, the joy that Jesus gives them is a joy that they possess even now, while “in the world” (17:13), and in spite of the fact that the world hates them and even persecutes them (17:14; 15:11-20). In the midst of their trying circumstances, they have comfort, courage, and peace (14:1, 27) because they can be assured both of the presence of their Lord with them in the midst of their trials, and of the hope that they will be with him, where he is – and that their presence with him in the father’s house

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<sup>20</sup>At this point, John is notoriously difficult. Exactly when and how Jesus will be “present” with his disciples has generated significant discussion. Indeed, one could argue that the entire problem dealt with in the Farewell Discourses is the problem that Jesus will be absent from the disciples. The various promises – to come and take them to be with them; to send the Spirit; to dwell with and among them – serve to mitigate the reality of Jesus’ absence, while at the same time acknowledging that he is not now with them as he was. So the “joy” that the disciples have, even when he is raised and appears to them, always remains forward looking to that time when they will be with him. For the promise that Jesus will be with them, see 14:27-28, 15:4-5; Jesus will take them to be with him in the Father’ house, 14:2-3; that Jesus and the Father will be with them, 14:19, 23; and that the Spirit will be with them, 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 13.

will bring an end to their distress.

But already the Baptist had announced that he “rejoices greatly” (*chara chairei*) and that his joy has been “fulfilled” at the coming of the bridegroom (3:29). This image of Jesus as the bridegroom may reflect the portrayal of God as the bridegroom of Israel in the OT (Isa. 62:5; Jer. 3:20; Ezek. 16:32; Hos. 1:2; 2:2; and see Eph. 5:23-32). If God’s judgment on Israel can be portrayed quite concretely as bringing an end to the joy of a bride and bridegroom (Jer 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11), then with the coming of the Messiah, the bridegroom, and the time of God’s salvation, it is time to rejoice. Once again, God brings about the conditions that occasion joy. John writes later, “the reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together” (4:36). The reaper overtakes the sower; this is the overlap of the time that is coming with the time that “now is” (cf. 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28). And that convergence of fulfillment in the present but anticipation of the future explains also the experience of eschatological joy in the present while yet hoping for the arrival of those conditions that bring joy to all the earth and its inhabitants.

Joy is therefore forward looking; it is linked with hope; it characterizes the coming and inbreaking kingdom of God (cf. Rom. 12:12; 15:13). That joy is forward looking coheres with and is an outgrowth of the biblical expectation that God’s judgments on the earth bring about righteousness. As noted earlier, a significant strand of biblical thought associates joy with God’s deliverance because that signals either release from oppression and injustice, or that God has now turned with favor towards his people once more. When the acceptable year of the Lord has come, it is appropriate to rejoice. There can be no joy over injustice, even if the Bible will also bear witness to those who experience joy while and in the midst of suffering. Joy characterizes those who have experienced God’s deliverance because they celebrate God’s righteousness and justice. As the Psalmist exclaims, “Let those who desire my vindication shout for joy and be glad, and say evermore, ‘Great is the LORD, who delights in the welfare of his servant’” (Ps. 35:27; cf. 32:11). Because the Lord judges with equity, the nations sing for joy (Ps. 37:4).<sup>21</sup> Joy therefore also belongs to those who anticipate God’s deliverance, God’s righteousness, and God’s justice. Those who live between the times of God’s graciousness towards his people and the world in the past and the anticipation of them in the future have joy because they trust in a reality that transcends the world’s horizons, but that will effect the goodness of the world. At present, what they see can elicit only a partial joy that anticipates the fullness of God’s remaking of the world; thus both faith and hope are necessary concomitants of joy.

Not surprisingly, joy belongs to the fruit of the Spirit, to those human qualities and dispositions that the Spirit of God effects and that ought to characterize not only the individual but the community together (Gal 5:22; Acts 15:32). Many of the fruits of the Spirit can really only be exercised in community, that is, with an eye towards the other. Love, patience, kindness, and generosity, for example, are not merely inner states of being, but how one lives with respect

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<sup>21</sup>The expressions of celebration because of the victories in battle and the triumphs over one’s enemies granted by God (1 Sam. 18:6; 2 Chr. 20:27) can only be short lived; joy must be coupled with peace and righteousness.

to the other. What, then, of joy? Paul does invite others to rejoice with him, and speaks of Christians sharing in joy (1 Cor. 12:26, 13:6; Phil. 2:18; cf. 1:25, 2:2; Phlm. 7). Looking back to the OT, one can also note that frequently calls to rejoice are addressed to the people as a whole. For example, in Deuteronomy the people are called to rejoice on the occasion of festivals and when going to the temple, and they are called to rejoice in the company of others, a point underscored by their gathering together in the central sanctuary. Rejoicing is the activity and response of the people together.<sup>22</sup> While joy can at times characterize the disposition of the individual,<sup>23</sup> particularly in times of affliction, it also denotes that conduct or way of life that belongs to God's people when they are in the proper relationship to God. In other words, "joy" is not a coping mechanism for dealing with difficulty, but the way one lives with others and before God.

### Summary reflections

As was noted frequently above, "joy" and "rejoicing" are most typically—indeed, almost always—lodged in the cultic sphere, in worship, or in the experience of the presence of God or the acknowledgment of the divine saving activity of God. So, from one perspective, we can say that God creates the conditions for joy, and that, therefore, God is finally responsible for human joy and human flourishing. This is the witness of the Biblical texts: when God restores the fortunes of Zion, then there is rejoicing; when the shepherd finds the one sheep that was lost, then all are to rejoice; when God brings his sovereign rule to bear on the earth, then there is "righteousness, peace and joy in the holy spirit." We may, then, legitimately charge God with the responsibility of bringing those conditions on earth that make possible, even necessary, the human response of joy. This responsibility is the outgrowth of God's identity as the creator of all that is, or at least of God's identity as the good creator of all that is good. Joy is therefore the human response to God's establishing, whether in creation or final redemption, a good world in which people find *shalom*. As part of human flourishing, joy is thus linked to, and dependent upon, participation in the world of God's creation and its recreation. If joy is response to God's activity, God's deliverance, joy may be experienced by those who neither see nor discern God's deliverance, but it is deepened by gratitude that discerns the hand of God at work for good.

Since joy is often that emotion or response that follows or replaces sorrow and distress, joy (rejoicing, gladness) is caused or effected by external circumstances or events. It is not appropriate to rejoice at oppression or tyranny or sorrow. Weeping is not rejoicing, but it will be turned to rejoicing. This does not mean that joy is fickle, but rather that joy is the response to the goodness of the order of the world. What is good elicits joy. The Scriptures thus indicate that genuine joy is linked with righteousness and peace, and that all these together depend upon

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<sup>22</sup> "You and your households together," Deut. 12:7, 14:26; "you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you," 16:11; cf. 26:11.

<sup>23</sup>In the OT joy is associated with the heart (Exod. 4:14; Ps. 19:8, 104:15; Prov. 15:30) or the soul (Ps. 86:4).

God's action to bring them about. The world does not on its own do justice or establish righteousness; it cannot, therefore, effect the circumstances that make for human joy. Because it responds to the good in the world, joy is therefore not indifference; it is not immune to the vagaries of human existence. Joy may disappear when there is great tragedy or loss; it will return when things are set to rights, when the causes of tragedy are taken away. Throughout the biblical accounts, joy is a response to events, elicited by God's salvation, by various triumphs, and so on. Paul experienced joy in the midst of suffering because he understood it to be a sharing in Christ's suffering, thus anticipating participation in Christ's resurrection. Suffering that has no end does not elicit joy.

Thus while the authors of the Bible hope for the time when they will be able to rejoice fully, they also rejoice in the present; they experience joy and gladness; they know of life that is characterized by equanimity, gratitude, and celebration, even if part of a life not untainted by war, injustice, conflict, debilitating illness, or death. The joy that is experienced in the present, prior to the removal of all causes of sorrow, acknowledges both the goodness of God's bountiful world and anticipates the outpouring of God's full blessings in the future. When Paul calls people to rejoice in the Lord always, the key may be the focus on "the Lord." One does not always rejoice in the world, or in circumstances, always: but one may rejoice in the Lord. To cultivate this trust and confidence in God and God's goodness is to cultivate joy.

Such Scriptural statements raise the question about how we should characterize joy; that is, is it a virtue? habit? emotion? attitude? Joy seems to arise spontaneously from the good things of the world: from wine, weddings, children, worship, or victory. As such, it is perhaps best classified as an emotion. Joy is effusive; joyful people celebrate, sing, clap, and shout. But joy can also be commanded. Indeed, Paul even commands the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord always. Joy is not simply or only the natural response to events, but can be commanded. Joy is therefore closer to a way of living that arises from being "in the Lord" and in turn rejoices in that identity. It is a counterintuitive response to the world. If the rest of the context of Philippians be taken into account, joy would be the disposition that accompanies the one who presses on towards the prize; who, forgetting what lies behind, strains towards what lies ahead (3:13-14.) Joy cannot be severed from hope and may even be said to arise or be possible precisely because one has hope. Even as joy is expressed when God brings about salvation, so joy may be known prior to that time because one anticipates God's salvation in hope. But where there is no hope, it is doubtful that there can be joy.

In sum, then, on the one hand, joy is brought about or occasioned by circumstances. It appropriately celebrates that which is good, righteous and just. Joy is joy because it understands and responds to that which God desires for the world – wholeness, abundance, justice, peace. Joy is therefore a response to external circumstances, and is shaped by them. Joy is the appropriate response to the well-being of God's world. Joy therefore expresses itself in singing, shouting, celebration; it is an effusive emotional response. Joy reflects God's own rejoicing in the world and its goodness. Because joy celebrates the goodness of God and God's world, it is therefore also appropriately disturbed when the well-being of God's world is interrupted or disturbed.

But, on the other hand, precisely because joy is grounded in the expectation of God's deliverance, it has the character of perseverance, confidence, and trust. It is not the same as perseverance, but neither is it fickle. Joy is reoriented in the New Testament around the initial fulfillment of that hope in God's saving work in Christ. Joy is thus both a response to God's salvation in Christ, and the attitude or disposition in the present time that is based on a confidence in God's goodness and gracious disposition towards humankind. In this sense, then, joy cannot be disturbed by external circumstances, even while – or, perhaps because – it anticipates that day when God wipes away every tear from every eye. Joy is a disposition that anticipates a time when all that destroys human well-being, the *shalom* of the world and its inhabitants, will be removed. Joy is a way of living that hopes for God's final shalom but, anticipating that shalom already in the present, also lives with confident hope and gratitude in the present time. Joy is the effusive expression of gratitude and praise that flows from a resolute, trusting heart that is suffused by hope in God