



Activity

In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet is telling the people that one day, despite their current displacement in a foreign land, they will return to their homeland, and be free to live under the rule of their God, Yahweh. The image of the river of paradise flowing from the temple (Ezek 47:1–12) provided the ancient audience with a vivid picture of this future existence under the re-established rule of God, an existence that provides for happiness.

The author of this essay has made a connection between the hope for a better life of American immigrants, the language of the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” in the Declaration of Independence, and the hopes and aspirations of the ancient Israelites forced to live in Babylonia. There are similarities and differences worth noting in this comparison.

Discussion Questions – The pursuit of happiness

As an introduction to how Ezekiel and his fellow exiles may have thought about happiness, beyond his famous vision of the river of paradise, take a look at the following passages from Proverbs, Job, and Psalms.

- Proverbs 3:13–18
- Job 28
- Psalm 1

What do these passages say about the ancient Hebrews’ “pursuit of happiness”? These passages leave room for us to consider how they may have defined happiness and what they may have considered to be “wisdom.”

It’s quite likely that the people of Judah in exile longed to pursue happiness as they thought of it: the safety, health, and prosperity of their family, honor in their village community, crops that grew abundantly, the right to live as an entire people in their ancestral lands, and the freedom to live under the rule of their (Israel’s) God. There are indeed parallels with our own modern ideals and values. Certainly our modern thinking about happiness as a largely individual emotional state that has little connection to a larger community would not have been familiar to the ancient Israelites.

Try the following questions as a way to think about similarities and differences between Ezekiel’s vision and American ideals about the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness.

- 1) Make two columns; one for modern America, the other for the exiles in Ezekiel. Identify American ideals about the pursuit of happiness (with a note about where these ideals arise: media, the Constitution, family, etc.) Then ask the same question for the Exiles, noting where each ideal appears in the text (chapter and verse, such as Ez 40-48 for the ideal that God can be with them in exile but can also return to the temple.)

Modern America		Exiles	
ideals	sources	ideals	citation

- 2) In what ways do you think that ancient Israel’s pursuit of happiness was similar to modern American pursuits of happiness? How was it different?