



Psalm 114 - God's Wonders at the Exodus

Introduction

This hymn of praise celebrates the special status of God's people in his plan: the Lord is the one whom all nature obeys, and even trembles before, and yet he has chosen little Israel to be his own, and he exerts his power on their behalf.

The psalm mentions the exodus from Egypt, the covenant at Sinai that made Israel to be God's dominion, the crossing of the Jordan River under Joshua's leadership, and God's provision for his people as they travelled through the wilderness. When the believing congregation sings this, they are better able to accept their current circumstances as under God's governance as well. The psalm uses exuberant personification, describing the Red Sea and Jordan River as if they fled from God, the mountains as skipping like lambs, and the earth as trembling at God's presence. The imagery conveys how powerful the Lord is: even the strongest natural forces would not dream of resisting him. However, the events of the psalm are not simply displays of raw power: God used his power for the sake of his people, Israel.

Charles Spurgeon had high praise for Psalm 114, the second in the series of Psalms sung as the Egyptian Hallel as part of Israel's Passover ceremony: "This sublime song of the Exodus is one and indivisible. True poetry has here reached its climax: no human mind has ever been able to equal, much less to excel, the grandeur of this Psalm."

Psalm 114:1-2 - Israel Became God's Holy Kingdom.

The opening section recalls the exodus, when God brought Israel out from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, and its consequence: Judah became God's sanctuary, and Israel became God's dominion, i.e. Israel is the holy place where God rules. Judah probably represents all Israel here, which would make sense if, as most scholars think, this psalm comes from after the Babylonian exile when Judah was all that was left of the ancient people. Describing Egypt as a people of strange language further supports this: Judah had recently dwelt among another people

speaking an unfamiliar language: <<*The Lord will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand*>> (Deuteronomy 28:49), <<*I am going to bring upon you a nation from far away, O house of Israel, says the Lord. It is an enduring nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say*>> (Jeremiah 5:15), and: <<*For you are not sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel – not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to them, they would listen to you*>> (Ezekiel 3:5-6).

- 1 When Israel went out from Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
- 2 Judah became God's sanctuary,
Israel his dominion.

Psalm 114:1-2

When Israel went out from Egypt. Israel's deliverance from Egypt was the central act of redemption under the Old Covenant: <<*And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God*>> (Exodus 29:46), <<*Who is like your people Israel, one nation on the earth whom God went to redeem to be his people, making for yourself a name for great and terrible things, in driving out nations before your people whom you redeemed from Egypt?*>> (1 Chronicles 17:21), <<*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son*>> (Hosea 11:1), and: <<*For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam*>> (Micah 6:4). It was to be constantly remembered and celebrated, and this song joins in the celebration. For those who are under the New Covenant in Jesus, the work of Jesus at the Cross and empty tomb becomes the central act of redemption. Christians are likewise called to constantly remember and celebrate what God did to set his people free.

The house of Jacob from a people of strange language. The emphasis is on the idea that Israel did not belong in Egypt. Although they lived there for some 400 years, it was never their home. There is a sense in which this world is a place of a people of strange language for all whom God redeems.

Judah became God's sanctuary. Although it is written: <<*but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves. He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded for ever*>> (Psalm 78:68-69), the leading tribe of Israel (Judah) represented the whole nation, becoming the dwelling place of God, i.e. his sanctuary. The godly in Israel always understood

that God's dwelling in the tabernacle or temple was only symbolic; his real presence was in his people.

Israel his dominion. Any place God dwells, he dominates. God's desire to make Israel his sanctuary was so they could honour him as Lord and Master, not merely as a helper or mascot.

Psalm 114:3-6 - The Red Sea and the Jordan River.

The next section recalls how God split the Red sea: <<*Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left*>> (Exodus 14:21-22), and later the Jordan River: <<*Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing towards the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan*>> (Joshua 3:15-17), and: <<*Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, saying to the Israelites, 'When your children ask their parents in time to come, "What do these stones mean?" then you shall let your children know, "Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground." For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God for ever'*>> (Joshua 4:20-24), where the two events are explicitly joined), for the sake of his people. The mountains may refer to God's arrival at Sinai: <<*Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up*>> (Exodus 19:18-20). The natural elements are personified, as if the sea, the river, and the mountains were all terrified of the Lord. This imagery is designed to show the absolute power that God has over his own creation.

- ³ The sea looked and fled;
Jordan turned back.

- 4 The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.
- 5 Why is it, O sea, that you flee?
O Jordan, that you turn back?
- 6 O mountains, that you skip like rams?
O hills, like lambs?

Psalm 114:3-6

The sea looked and fled. As in other places in Hebrew poetry, the psalmist personified nature and described it as responding to God in fear or reverence. Here he mentioned the parting of waters at both the Red Sea and the Jordan River, at the beginning and end of Israel's journey to the Promised Land.

Jordan turned back. The psalmist gives a beautiful and powerful picture. When these waters divided, they simply responded to the awesome presence of the Lord. The sense is, "What else could they do?" Spurgeon commented, "The poet does not sing of the suspension of natural laws, or of a singular phenomenon not readily to be explained; but to him the presence of God with his people is everything, and in his lofty song he tells how the river was driven back because the Lord was there."

Spurgeon also saw spiritual significance in this combination of the start of the Exodus and the end of it: "The division of the sea and the drying up of the river are placed together though forty years intervened, because they were the opening and closing scenes of one great event. We may thus unite by faith our new birth and our departure out of the world into the promised inheritance, for the God who led us out of the Egypt of our bondage under sin will also conduct us through the Jordan of death out of our wilderness wanderings in the desert of this tried and changeable life. It is all one and the same deliverance, and the beginning ensures the end."

The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. This probably has reference to the strong earthquakes and similar phenomenon that happened at Mount Sinai as described in Exodus 19:16-20, when God manifested His presence there. They shook and skipped like sheep.

Why is it, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back? The psalmist taunted both the sea and the mountains. They were powerless to stand against the mighty presence of God. It is even more foolish to think that humankind, either individually or together, could stand against God's mighty presence.

Spurgeon commented further, "God has come nearer to us than ever he did to Sinai, or to Jordan, for he has assumed our nature, and yet the mass of

mankind are neither driven back from their sins, nor moved in the paths of obedience.”

Psalm 114:7-8 - Tremble, O Earth, at God’s Presence!

The third section continues to speak of God’s power over his world. The inclusion of ‘tremble, O earth’ and ‘turns the rock into a pool of water’ probably relate to the two events like this in the Pentateuch, which are recorded in Exodus 17:6 and Numbers 20:8-13. In both cases God showed his power over the elements in order to care for his people. God’s people in each generation may sing this and take courage from his great power.

⁷ Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
⁸ who turns the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water.

Psalm 114:7-8

Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord. This is the first time in Psalm 114 that God is referred to by any name or title, i.e. the Lord or ‘*Adonay*’ and the God of Jacob. Up this point, the psalmist has asked questions: Who is it? What did it? The author must have been having fun as he wrote, knowing the answer and knowing his readers would know the answer too, but holding it off. He asks, “What could have caused the sea to part, the river to turn back, and the hills to tremble?” For twelve lines he has allowed the reader’s interest to build for dramatic effect.

Who turns the rock into a pool of water. The psalmist remembered one more event of God’s power over creation during the Exodus years – when God brought forth water for his people from the rock and the hardened flint. This assures the people of God that his mighty presence works for them, not against them. As Psalm 113 closed with God’s compassion on the barren woman, Psalm 114 closes with God’s compassion on thirsty Israel. His great power and might are not merely for the dividing of waters and shaking of mountains. His majestic might brings blessing to his people one by one.

Christians should also remind themselves that Jesus sang this psalm together with his disciples on the night he was betrayed and arrested; refer to Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26. He would grant the people of God a greater deliverance than Israel out of Egypt, and in that work all nature would be shaken: <<*From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon*>> (Matthew 27:45), and: <<*At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split*>> (Matthew 27:51).