

This Hallel hymn of praise, along with Psalm 113, was traditionally sung before the celebration of the Passover. The range of salvation history encompassed in this short, enigmatic psalm is great stretching from the exodus to Mount Sinai to the wilderness wanderings and finally to the conquest of the promised land. It is a spiraling burst of praise, a theologically loaded exclamation mark, that poetically compares the new creation of God's redemption to his power to part the Red Sea, throw the Jordan River in reverse, and bring forth a spring of water out of rock. What is also impressive, is that as the gospel of Jesus Christ spread the disciples were accused of turning the world upside down and causing trouble all over the world (Acts 17:6).

Psalm 114 is Hebrew synonymous parallelism in its most cryptic and perfect form. The eight verses are composed of fourteen paired relationships which are the same yet different: Israel/Jacob, Egypt/a people of a foreign tongue, Judah/Israel, sanctuary/dominion, sea [Red Sea]/Jordan River, mountains/hills, rams/lambs, sea/Jordan, fled/turned back, mountains/hills, rams/lambs, the presence of the Lord/the presence of the God of Jacob, rock/hard rock, pool/springs of water. The purpose of this literary composition, according to Patrick Reardon, is to slow us down and make us go over everything twice. "Such poetry is deeply meditative, and the reader who resists its impulse will find himself with acid indigestion of the mind, serious 'heartburn' in a most radical and theological sense."¹ The psalm's "ultimate aim" is to get the people of God "to take the God of the exodus seriously."² The psalmist reframes the Exodus in a startling new way. Kidner writes, "Here is the Exodus not as a familiar item in Israel's creed but as an astounding event: as startling as a clap of thunder, as shattering as an earthquake."³

Cataclysmic events are described in clipped phrases. The staccato style invokes energy and action. I picture African believers pounding out the beat on drums while the congregation dances to the rhythm. Nothing mellow and placid is able to capture the great escape and nature's commotion. Psalm 114 rocks. The people of God are coming out, the sea is fleeing, the mountains are leaping, the earth is trembling, and it is all because of the presence of the Lord, who turns "the hard rock into springs of water." Creation is upended; redemption flows.

Exodus

*When Israel came out of Egypt,
Jacob from a people of foreign tongue,
Judah became God's sanctuary,
Israel his dominion.*

Psalm 114:1-2

The usual call to praise the Lord is skipped in the psalmist's rush to describe the epicenter of Israel's redemption, the exodus from Egyptian slavery. The delay in mentioning the Lord by name "builds anticipation."⁴ The exodus is a type, an historical event in the past that represents God's future redemptive work. Believers today rejoice that the future has become the present.

¹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 225.

² Goldingay, *Psalms*, 321.

³ Kidner, *Psalms*, 403.

⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, 401.

The prophetic trajectory of the exodus, the Passover, the law, and the conquest of the promised land has all been realized in the cross of Christ. “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7-8).

The one distinguishing mark of the oppressor’s culture highlighted by the psalmist is language. This is not a passing reference to the language barrier and communicating in a foreign language. The psalmist sees language as a key to understanding culture. Linguistics is the medium of a way of thinking and living that violated the will of God. It symbolized a barbaric worldview. The oppressive Egyptians were idolatrous pagans, jabbering on about sexual encounters with goddesses and romantic relationships between brothers and sisters.⁵ On subjects such as architecture and philosophy their Egyptian masters sounded sophisticated, but they worshiped the sun and the moon. Their pantheon was filled with “a chattering menagerie” of animal gods. Sex worship was pervasive and they offered their most beautiful women to mate with bulls and goats.⁶ The Israelites were shocked and appalled.

The reference to Israel and Judah may be two ways of representing all the people. Israel stands for the people as a nation and Judah stands for all twelve tribes that make up the nation. Likewise, the reference to “sanctuary” and “dominion” represents two sides of the same reality. Israel was a both a holy nation and a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6). The spiritual and political realities merge under one Lord, who is both Priest and King. Ross writes, “. . . The Israelites entered a special relationship with the Lord and became a new order of creation. Their new status would mean that they would be the sanctuary and the dominion of God almighty.”⁷ The New Testament resonants with this typological language. “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come” (2 Cor 5:17). Believers constitute a “royal priesthood” and a “holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9) and the reality of Church and Kingdom are intimately related.

Creation’s Response

*The sea looked and fled,
the Jordan turned back;
the mountains leaped like rams,
the hills like lambs.
Why was it, sea, that you fled?
Why, Jordan, did you turn back?
Why, mountains did you leap like rams,
you hills, like lambs?*

Psalm 114:3-6

The tumult in nature signals supernatural events on the ground. In a few poetic lines, the psalmist covers the Red Sea parting and the Jordan River crossing and Mount Sinai erupting. Three major defining moments in the wilderness epic testify to the Lord’s power over nature (Exod 14:13-31; 19:16-18; Josh 3:15-16; 4:21-24). The nature gods of Egypt and Canaan are vanquished by the

⁵ Will Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage*, 177.

⁶ Durant, 199.

⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, 402.

Lord of creation. They are not gods at all, but servants of the Lord most high. Nature is questioned, but she need not respond because the answer is obvious. The description of the sea fleeing, the river backing up, and the mountains skipping like lambs, suggests that nature itself is in a flutter when God shows up. Kidner puts it well: “With a superb flourish it shows us the scurrying and excitement set up by the Creator’s arrival with His earthly court: sea and river falling over themselves, so to speak, to make way for Him; mountains and hills no longer aloof and majestic but all animated and agog.”⁸

Nature miracles abound at strategic points in salvation history. The Gospels pick up this aspect of the story with Elizabeth’s conception of John and Mary’s conception of Jesus. The new creation is ushered in by Jesus who demonstrates the power of God to feed multitudes, calm the sea, heal the sick, and raise the dead. Nature will also play a big role in the final judgment and the coming of the new heaven and the new earth.

The Presence of the Lord

*Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turned the rock into a pool,
the hard rock into springs of water.
Psalm 114:7-8*

The climax of the psalm comes when the God of the exodus is named. He is the Lord, the God of Jacob. His presence shakes the earth and causes the sea to flee. Creation trembles before God and the people of God fear the Lord. Nature is neither defied nor demonized, but it reflects its Creator and submits to its Master. The presence of God at the Exodus was marked by unmistakable power miracles, but the psalm closes with two redemptive miracles.

At Rephidim there was no water for the people to drink and they quarreled against the Lord and against Moses. Moses rebuked the people for putting the Lord to the test. But the Lord told Moses to strike the rock with the same staff that he used to part the Red Sea and water would come forth (Exod 17:1-7). A similar incident took place at Kadesh, only this time, the Lord said, “Speak to the rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink” (Num 20:8). These two miracles of bringing water out of rock testify to “God’s absolute creative power” and they bear witness to God’s redemptive grace that chose to make of an oppressed people his chosen people, “his sanctuary and dominion.”⁹

To pray Psalm 114 today is to be aware of the presence of Jesus. It is to see him, the God of Jacob incarnate, sitting by Jacob’s well engaging in conversation with a Samaritan woman. It is to hear him say, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that ask you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” It is to hear Jesus offer her living water “welling up to eternal life” (John 4:10,14).

⁸ Kidner, Psalms, 403.

⁹ Ross, Psalms, 406.