Psalm 114 — No Obstacle is Too Great

1.0 Introducing Psalm 114

- Just as in Psalm 29, the psalmist’s theme in Psalm 114 is the glorious appearance of God on earth — a theophany.
- Psalm 114 distills Israel’s history into eight short verses that stand in contrast to the more lengthy historical hymns found in Psalms 78, 105, and 106.
- As the second psalm in the “Egyptian Hallel” (Pss 113–118, see notes on Ps 113), Psalm 114 is traditionally recited on the eighth day of Passover.
- “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.” — Derek Kidner, Psalms 73–150, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 403.

2.0 Reading Psalm 114 (NAU)

114:1 When Israel went forth from Egypt,
The house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
114:2 Judah became His sanctuary,
Israel, His dominion.
114:3 The sea looked and fled;
The Jordan turned back.
114:4 The mountains skipped like rams,
The hills, like lambs.
114:5 What ails you, O sea, that you flee?
O Jordan, that you turn back?
114:6 O mountains, that you skip like rams?
O hills, like lambs?
114:7 Tremble, O earth, before the Lord,
Before the God of Jacob,
114:8 Who turned the rock into a pool of water,
The flint into a fountain of water.

3.0 Understanding Psalm 114

3.1 Outline

I. Extraction of a Designated People (vv. 1-2)
II. Exhibition of Divine Power (vv. 3-6)
III. Exaltation of the Divine Person (vv. 7-8)

3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “strange language”
  - This is the only time this particular Hebrew word occurs in the Old Testament. The meaning is “speaking an incomprehensible language.”
  - Anyone who has attempted to speak a difficult foreign language can sympathize with the Israelites’ situation during their time in Egypt.

- **v. 2** “Judah became His sanctuary”
  - “His sanctuary” = “His holy place.”
  - God chose Jerusalem in the territory of Judah as the site for the Ark of the Covenant and for His Temple.
  - Note the use of the pronoun to refer to the Lord without an antecedent to which it might refer. The poetic purpose becomes evident as we read the psalm.
    - The psalmist delays direct reference to the Lord until the completion of a crescendo of rhetorical questions (vv. 5-6). It creates suspense, arousing and preserving the hearer’s or reader’s interest.
    - A number of recent Bible versions interfere in the poetic effect by inserting “God’s” in verse 2 (NIV, NRSV, NLT).

- **v. 2** “Judah . . . Israel, His dominion”
  - The parallelism of “sanctuary” and “dominion” are a reminder that all Israel was to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6).
  - The use of both names need not indicate a time during the divided kingdom since both were used side by side in the time of Saul (1 Sam 11:8; 17:52), David (2 Sam 3:10; 24:1), and Solomon (1 Kgs 1:35; 4:20).

- **vv. 3-6** “sea . . . Jordan . . . mountains . . . hills”
  - Each of these geographical elements responded to the presence of God during the miraculous deliverance of Israel from Egypt and their entry into the promised land of Canaan.
  - Next, the psalmist addresses each of the elements with “What ails you?” (literally, “What happened to you?” or “What is it to you?” = “Why did you . . .?”).
The answer the psalmist expects is, “Because of the Lord, the God of Jacob” (cp. v. 7).

The rhetorical questions draw emphatic attention to the power of God’s presence and enhance the feeling of awe.

- v. 3 “The sea looked and fled”
  - At the crossing of the Red Sea, the waters fled from the path God provided for Israel so they could cross over on dry land.

- v. 3 “The Jordan turned back”
  - When God led Israel across the Jordan River, He stopped the waters from flowing so that they could cross on dry land.

- v. 4 “skipped like rams, . . . like lambs”
  - When did the mountains and hills move like this?
  - When God appeared on Mt. Sinai, the mountain quaked (Exod 19:18; Judg 5:4-5; Ps 68:7-8). Earthquake and fire often accompany theophanies in the Old Testament.
  - Compare Habakkuk 3:3-13 and Nahum 1:3-6.

- v. 7 “Tremble, O earth”
  - “Tremble” expresses the consciousness of one’s unworthiness in the presence of the holy and almighty God. See 1 Chronicles 16:30.
  - “Earth” sums up sea, river, mountains, and hills.
  - As in similar contexts elsewhere, the Lord is presented as Sovereign over all the earth.
    - See Joshua 3:11; Psalm 97:4-5.

- v. 7 “the Lord, . . . the God of Jacob”
  - “Lord” is the Hebrew title Adon, meaning “Master,” “Lord,” or “Sovereign.”
  - The Hebrew of “the God of Jacob” appears nowhere else in the Old Testament.
    - Eloah Ya’agov employs an ancient title of God that dates back to the Book of Job, where it is found 41 times.
    - Eloah is the Hebrew equivalent of the Arabic Allah, the biblical name for God used in Arabia (Job’s land) long before it was appropriated by Mohammed and Islam. In Habbakkuk 3:3 it is Eloah who comes from Teman in Arabia.
    - See also Deuteronomy 32:15; Psalm 18:31-32.
• v. 8 “Who”
  - With dramatic effect the psalm has built to this climax. The focus is upon God.
  - “If God is for His people, what can possibly stand in their way to oppose them? The answer is, Nothing at all, neither seas nor rivers nor mountains.” — James Montgomery Boice, Psalms, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 3:931.

• v. 8 “turned the rock into a pool of water”
  - See Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:11; Psalm 105:41.
  - In the future God will repeat this kind of provision for His people as He blesses them.

4.0 Singing Psalm 114

When Israel, Freed from Pharaoh’s Hand
(Tune: “Before the Throne of God Above”)

1 When Israel, freed from Pharaoh’s hand
   Left the proud tyrant and his land,
   The tribes with cheerful homage own
   Their King, and Judah was His throne.

2 Across the deep their journey lay;
   The deep divides to make them way;
   Jordan beheld their march, and fled
   With backward current to his head.

3 The mountains shook like frightened sheep,
   Like lambs the little hillocks leap;
   Not Sinai on her base could stand,
   Conscious of sovereign power at hand.

4 What power could make the deep divide?
   Make Jordan backward roll his tide?
   Why did ye leap, ye little hills?
   And whence the fright that Sinai feels?

5 Let every mountain, every flood,
   Retire and know th’approaching God,
   The King of Israel: see Him here;
   Tremble, thou earth, adore and fear.

6 He thunders, and all nature mourns;
   The rock to standing pools He turns;
   Flints spring with fountains at His word,
   And fires and seas confess the Lord.

— Isaac Watts, The Psalms of David, 1719

5.0 Praying Psalm 114

• Lord, You alone deliver Your people. [v. 1]
• Father, You control all the elements of Your creation. [vv. 3-6]
• Create in me a godly sense of awe at Your great Power and Presence. [v. 7]
• Thank You for providing for Your people in unexpected ways. [v. 8]
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6.0 Applying Psalm 114

• No obstacle is too great for our God to overcome on our behalf.