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## Psalm 114

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## Psalm 114

(RSV)

### Introduction to Psalm 114

Psalms 113-118 are a grouping of Psalms known collectively as the "Egyptian Hallel" Psalms, so called because of the mention of the Exodus from Egypt in Psalm 114:1. These Psalms were used at the annual Jewish festival of the Passover, because the Passover was the yearly commemoration of that great deliverance. Psalms 113-114 were sung before the Passover meal, while Psalms 115-118 were sung after the meal, as also Jesus did according to Mark 14:26.

Psalm 114 is a short poetic remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt and the settlement of the Promised Land. Notice how its eight verses form four pairs, and how each verse is composed in such a way that the second member is parallel to the first, presupposing the verb of the first.

We should remember that when Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples, he was recalling the great Exodus from Egypt and the promise of salvation that lay concealed within it. The Exodus was a (proto)type of the full salvation that he had come to accomplish. When we Christians partake of the Lord's Supper in remembrance of him, part of what we are to remember is God's promise in the Exodus.

### Vv. 1-2

- <sup>1</sup> **When Israel went forth from Egypt,  
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,**  
<sup>2</sup> **Judah became His (Yahweh's) sanctuary,  
Israel His (Yahweh's) dominion.**

These verses recall the foundational event of salvation for God's Old Testament People. Enslaved and held against their will in Egypt, in a land where their captors spoke a different language, they went forth to their own land which Yahweh had promised them. There they became the People of God.

In their later history "Judah" and "Israel" designated respectively the Southern and the Northern Kingdoms of a divided People. But in their origin and in their God-intended future they are One People; hence they are used synonymously here.

When we Christians pray this Psalm, we will of course also remember the deliverance from Egypt, but as a promise of the fuller deliverance which Jesus came to accomplish. There is a deeper sense in which we are in bondage; as we say in the confession of sins, "We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." There are significant ways in which the world around us speaks a different language, whether the topic is the commandments of God or whether it is the meaning of Good Friday and Easter. And the destination to which the LORD would lead us goes beyond the earthly Promised Land; it goes right through our death under the heavy hand of God into the resurrection to Life Everlasting.

**Vv. 3-4**

- <sup>3</sup> The (Red) Sea looked and fled** (receded);  
**Jordan turned back** (flowed upstream!).  
**<sup>4</sup> The mountains skipped** (jittered) **like** (frightened) **rams,**  
**the hills like** (skittish) **lambs.**

The Israelites' passage through the Red Sea at the very beginning of their journey (Exodus 14) and the Crossing of the Jordan River into the Promised Land at the end of their wanderings (Joshua 3 & 4) are paired here framing the miraculous events by which God kept His ancient promise to Abraham (Deuteronomy 34:4).

Verse 4 is not speaking of joyful animals; it speaks rather of fearful animals. The mountains and the hills are not alive with the sound of music; they are awe-struck at the strange and unusual events that here unfolding.

**Vv. 5-6**

- <sup>5</sup> What ails you, O sea, that you flee?**  
**O Jordan, that you turn back?**  
**<sup>6</sup> O mountains, that you skip like rams?**  
**O hills, like lambs?**

These verses repeat verses 3 and 4, only now as questions. What is it that induces such a holy fear? And the answer comes in the final verses of this Psalm.

**Vv. 7-8**

- <sup>7</sup> Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD,**  
**at the presence of the God of Jacob,**  
**<sup>8</sup> who turns the rock into a pool of water,**  
**the flint into a spring of water.**

Not until now is there any direct reference to the God of salvation. Even in verse 2 there is no antecedent for the pronouns "His." Only the external event, as it were, has been visible. Now the Psalmist comes clean. Rightly does the earth tremble, for these events of salvation only thinly disguise the Presence of the LORD, the God of Jacob. Recall that, when Jesus died for the full salvation of the world, the earth shook and trembled, rocks were split, and even the tombs of the saints were opened.

I find it fascinating that the Psalm ends with a reference to the LORD's providing Israel with water from the rock in their wilderness wanderings (Exodus 17:6 and Numbers 20:10). Of course, water was a physical necessity for survival in the barren and hostile desert in which they were now wandering. And by providing them with the needed water the LORD sustained their life. That provides the image for the use of water in the baptism of the Easter Vigil. Those who are baptized in that holy service (as indeed all of us who are baptized, regardless of when it took place) are provided with the water of eternal life, and that sustains us in our journey through this life en route to our Promised Land.

Once Jesus said (John 7:37-38), "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink, let him believe in me." Out of his heart flows rivers of living water. From that source we may drink, for we have

been baptized into him. The forty days of Lent are often used as a symbol for our journey through life, for our “forty year wilderness wandering” toward our heavenly destination. The transition from Lent to Easter in the Vigil repeats the promise of our baptism of water and the Spirit, namely, that at the end of our journey under the sign of the Cross we shall be raised with Christ into the joys of the resurrection.

**The LBW Prayer to accompany Psalm 114:**

Almighty God, you gave life to the new Israel by birth from water and the Spirit. Make all those whom you have called to walk in the splendor of the new light render you fitting service and adoration, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(I have a number of Nuggets stored up, so I will include more than usual this time, especially since I have ample space left over in a relatively short Psalm Study.)

**Nugget**

In the history of human reflection there is no more penetrating analysis of the interior dynamics of domination by the tyranny of the self, nor a profounder prolegomenon (=introduction) to the specific place of grace in the intellectual life than in the meditations of St. Augustine. He affirms that man’s knowledge is determined by man’s love. *We do not know truly because we do not love properly or amply. Right knowledge is a function of right love.* And what is the actual history of man’s love? Simply that he loves himself – passionately, toughly, fiercely, relentlessly. This passion is man’s pathos, and there is no adequate liberation, no salvation for him so long as its way and power be not broken and changed. Unless and until the love with which I love finds its proper object in the love with which I am loved by God I am a prisoner of love too small for love’s heavenly nature and scope. The gospel declares that this human fact has been met by a sufficient godly act. Its name is Jesus Christ, “...who loved us and gave himself for us.”

Joseph Sittler, *The Care of the Earth*

**Nugget**

Have mercy upon us, O God, in the temptations of our unsatisfied desires and the perplexity of our disappointments. Teach us that childlike faith in the simplicity of which is perfect rest. We thank thee that thy purposes are larger than our thought or hope; and that thy love denies as well as gives. So help us to set our hearts upon the doing of thy will and to rest upon thy care that each present withholding may bring us assurance of a wider good. Hear our petitions for the gifts of earth according to thy wisdom, and not according to our ignorant desire. Let not the fulfillments of this present time become the disappointments of the eternal life, nor the pleasures of today sources of weakness for tomorrow.

Forgive us our weak striving, our impatient yieldings to self-will, our unresisted doubts and fears. Confirm in us thy strength, that when our time of blessing comes and thy love provides according to our heart's desire, we may be ready to make the noblest use of every opportunity. In the name of Christ. Amen.

Isaac Ogden Rankin (1852 -- ??)

### Nugget

I think there is no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe. I know what torment this is, but I can only see it, in myself anyway, as the process by which faith is deepened. A faith that just accepts is a child's faith and all right for children, but eventually you have to grow religiously as every other way, though some never do.

What people do not realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe. If you feel you can't believe, you must at least do this: keep an open mind. Keep it open toward faith, keep wanting it, keep asking for it, and leave the rest to God.

When we get our spiritual house in order, we'll be dead. This goes on. You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is making it in darkness. Don't expect faith to clear things up for you. Faith is trust, not certainty.

Flannery O'Connor (1925 – 1964), *The Habit of Being*

### **(Try this as an alternative table prayer.)**

Our table now with food is spread:  
O God, who givest daily bread,  
Bless these Thy gifts unto us so  
That strength of body they bestow.

O feed the hungry, God of love,  
Who sigh for bread to Heaven above;  
Give to each land prosperity,  
And bless the earth, the sky, the sea.

O may this day for Thee be spent,  
And give us all a mind content;  
O grant our souls the heavenly food  
Which Jesus purchased with his blood. Amen.

Thomas Kingo (1634 – 1703) Danish Lutheran hymn writer

*Walter E. Keller*

April 22, 2000 – **The Easter Vigil**