

When Israel went out of Egypt: Psalm 114

by Douglas E. Cox

Psalm 114:1-2

When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language;
Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion.

Charles H. Spurgeon wrote:— [1]

The meaning of the passage is that the whole people at the coming out of Egypt were separated unto the Lord to be a peculiar people, a nation of priests whose motto should be, "Holiness unto the Lord." Judah was the Lord's "holy thing," set apart for his special use. The nation was peculiarly Jehovah's dominion, for it was governed by a theocracy in which God alone was King. It was his domain in a sense in which the rest of the world was outside his kingdom.

Augustine applied the psalm to Christians. He wrote: [2]

Let us therefore consider what we are taught here; since both those deeds were typical of us, and these words exhort us to recognise ourselves. For if we hold with a firm heart the grace of God which has been given us, we are Israel, the seed of Abraham: unto us the Apostle says, 'Therefore are you the seed of Abraham.' ..Let therefore no Christian consider himself alien to the name of Israel. For we are joined in the corner stone with those among the Jews who believed, among whom we find the Apostles chief. Hence our Lord in another passage says, 'And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, that there may be one fold and one Shepherd.' The Christian people then is rather Israel, and the same is preferably the house of Jacob; for Israel and Jacob are the same. ... What is it, most beloved? You who know yourselves to be Israelites according to Abraham's seed, you who are of the house of Jacob, heirs according to promise, know that even you have gone forth from Egypt, since you have renounced this world; that you have gone forth from a foreign people, since by the confession of piety, you have separated yourselves from the blasphemies of the Gentiles. For it is not your tongue, but a foreign one, which knows not how to praise God, to whom you sing Allelujah. For Judah His sanctuary in you; for he is not a Jew which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew which is one inwardly, and by circumcision of the heart. Examine then your

hearts, if faith has circumcised them, if confession has cleansed them; in you Judah has become His sanctuary, in you Israel has become His dominion. For He gave unto you the power to become the sons of God.

Robert Hawker, quoted by Spurgeon, wrote:— [3]

Verse 2. *Judah was his sanctuary*, etc. Reader, do not fail to remark, when Israel was brought out of Egypt the Lord set up his tabernacle among them, and manifested his presence to them. And what is it now, when the Lord Jesus brings out his people from the Egypt of the world? Doth he not fulfil that sweet promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world"? Is it not the privilege of his people, to live to him, to live with him, and to live upon him? Doth he not in every act declare, "I will say, it is my people; and they shall say, the Lord is my God"? Mt 28:20; Zec 13:9.

The church is his sanctuary in the present age; clearly the Psalm has an application to the church. Jesus said, "salvation is of the Jews;" believers are the *spiritual sanctuary* of Judah.

Psalm 114:3

The sea saw it, and fled: Jordan was driven back.

In the Exodus, the people of Israel crossed over the sea bed when the water retreated, which Paul described as a "baptism." He wrote, "Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea;" showing that the crossing of the Red Sea was a type of Christian baptism. [1 Corinthians 10:1-2]

Eugene H. Peterson wrote: [4]

At one level this is simply a colorful account of the exodus: "The sea looked and fled." In the more sober language of prose, this is the story of Israel. Fleeing from the Egyptians and then blocked at the waters of the Red Sea, the people walked through on dry land after Moses struck the waters with his staff and the waters parted. God "provided a way of escape." "Jordan turned back" remembers Israel's being prevented from entering the Promised Land at the conclusion of her forty years' wilderness trek by the formidable Jordan River. Then Joshua struck the waters with his staff, the river parted, and the people marched through and began their conquest of the land. God provided a way of victory.

On verse 4, Charles H. Spurgeon wrote:— [5]

The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs. At the coming of the Lord to Mount Sinai, the hills moved; either leaping for joy in the presence of their Creator like young lambs; or, if you will, springing from their places in affright at the terrible majesty of Jehovah, and flying like a flock of sheep when alarmed. Men fear the mountains, but the mountains tremble before the Lord. Sheep and lambs move lightly in the meadows; but the hills, which we are wont to call eternal, were as readily

made to move as the most active creatures. Rams in their strength, and lambs in their play, are not more stirred than were the solid hills when Jehovah marched by. Nothing is immovable but God himself: the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed, but the covenant of his grace abideth fast for ever and ever. Even thus do mountains of sin and hills of trouble move when the Lord comes forth to lead his people to their eternal Canaan.

While the mountains and hills may have trembled at the time of the Exodus, an earthquake would affect all the land, not just mountains. Earthquakes are natural events, but the image of rams and lambs leaping or skipping does not fit the shaking of mountains and hills during earthquakes, because mountains and hills remain firmly attached to the earth, whereas when rams and lambs leap or skip, they are briefly raised up above the earth and are completely detached from it. Natural mountains and hills do not "leap for joy," as Spurgeon said, and they have no fear.

John Calvin doubted that mountains skipped, and supposed that author of the Psalm wished to impress illiterate people. He wrote:— [6]

Verse 4. The mountains skipped like rams, etc. The figure drawn from the lambs and rams would appear to be inferior to the magnitude of the subject. But it was the prophet's intention to express in the homeliest way the incredible manner in which God, on these occasions, displayed his power. The stability of the earth being, as it were, founded on the mountains, what connection can they have with rams and lambs, that they should be agitated, skipping hither and thither? In speaking in this homely style, he does not mean to detract from the greatness of the miracle, but more forcibly to engrave these extraordinary tokens of God's power on the illiterate.

The Plain Commentary has:— [7]

Verse 4. At the giving of the law at Sinai, Horeb and the mountains around, both great and small, shook with a sudden and mighty earthquake, like rams leaping in a grassy plain, with the young sheep frisking round them.

Whether such an earthquake occurred is unknown. The author was speculating.

Ralph Robinson wrote:— [8]

What ailed thee, O thou sea, that thou fleddest? thou Jordan, that thou wast driven back? ye mountains, that ye skipped like rams?, etc. The prophet speaks those words of the powerful entrance of the children of Israel into Canaan. The like is done by Christ in the conversion of a sinner. Jordan is driven back, the whole course of the soul is altered, the mountains skip like rams. There are many mountains in the soul of a sinner, as pride, unbelief, self conceitedness, atheism, profaneness, etc. These mountains are plucked up by the roots in a moment when Christ begins the work of conversion.

While a figurative interpretation could work, this one proposes an interpretation of mountains that lacks Scriptural support. Where in Scripture are any of these things, pride, unbelief, self conceitedness, atheism, profaneness, represented by mountains?

Paul E. Kretzmann wrote: [9]

V. 4. *the mountains skipped like rams and the little hills like lambs*, the reference being to the quaking of Mount Sinai and the surrounding country at the time of the giving of the Law.

The problem is, mountains quaking would remain attached to the earth, and they do not become detached from it like rams and lambs when they skip.

A. S. Aglen considered "leaping of the hills" to be a common expression. He wrote: [10]

(4) *Skipped*.— The Hebrew word thus rendered is translated "dance" in Eccles. iii. 4. (See Ps. xviii. 7.) Exodus xix. 18 was no doubt in the poet's thought, but the leaping of the hills formed part of every theophany.

It is quite possible the concept in Psalm 114 influenced later writers.

Albert Barnes was another commentator who imagined that the Psalmist described mountains and hills "in a state of commotion." He wrote: [11]

The mountains skipped like rams – As flocks in their gambols. They seemed to move from place to place; everything seemed to be unsettled, and acknowledged the presence of the Omnipotent One. The word rendered "skipped" means to leap for joy; to dance. See the notes at Psalm 29:6. The reference here is to the agitations and commotions of the peaks of Sinai, when God came down to deliver the law. Exodus 19:16-18.

And the little hills like lambs – Hebrew, Like the sons of the flock. The reference here is to the less prominent eminences of Sinai. The lofty hills, and the smaller hills surrounding, seemed to be all in a state of commotion.

But, natural mountains do not move from place to place. The Psalmist was not referring to the rocks at Sinai as Barnes assumed.

In the Old Testament, and in Psalm 114, mountains and hills are symbols representing revelations of God, blessings, covenants, promises, and prophecies. This is evident in Genesis 49:26, when Jacob blessed his son Joseph. He said that his blessings extended "unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills." [Genesis 49:26] This alludes to their height, and their duration. Mountains are both durable, and high, so they represent things that are eternal, having lofty, or spiritual meanings. Promises to the saints about spiritual things are represented by mountains.

Why did the Psalmist compare mountains with sheep? When David wrote, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," [Psalm 23:1] he identified himself with sheep, and Israel is identified with the sheep of God's flock in Psalm 74:1; 95:7; and 100:3, and other Scriptures.

Jeremiah wrote, "Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the Lord." [Jeremiah 23:1] And, "Israel is a scattered sheep; the lions have driven him away." [Jeremiah 50:17]

In Ezekiel 34 the people of God are described metaphorically as sheep. Ezekiel 34:31 says, "And ye my flock, the flock of my pasture, are men, and I am your God, saith the Lord GOD."

Other prophecies identify Israel with God's sheep. And when Israel came out of Egypt, the promises God gave to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob went with them. These were profound revelations, including the promises which Jacob compared to mountains. In the wilderness, at Sinai, Israel received revelations from God that are represented by mountains, together with basic, less profound teachings, represented by hills. The mountains that skip like rams or lambs are revelations with a spiritual or heavenly significance. *Spiritual mountains* and hills are the *promises of God*, including *the gospel*. They skipped like rams, and lambs, when Israel went out of Egypt, because the events of the Exodus had a spiritual significance; the passover lamb, for example, foreshadowed the death of Christ on the cross. Other types from the exodus are listed in the following table.

Type	Spiritual meaning
ten plagues upon Egypt	seven trumpets in Revelation
Pharaoh's oppression	the bondage of sin
passover lamb	Christ is our passover
Israel leaves Egypt	believers escape from the world and sin
crossing the Red Sea	baptism
manna	Christ the bread from heaven
water from rock	the rock represents Christ
the brazen serpent	Christ was lifted up
the promised land	possessing our spiritual inheritance

In verses 5-6, the Psalmist challenges readers to figure out why the sea fled, and why Jordan was driven back, and why the mountains skipped like rams, and the hills skipped like lambs.

Psalm 114:5-6

What ailed thee, O thou sea, that thou fleddest? thou Jordan, that thou wast driven back?

Ye mountains, that ye skipped like rams; and ye little hills, like lambs?

The presence of God among his people caused the earth to tremble:

Psalm 114:7-8

Tremble, thou earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob; Which turned the rock into a standing water, the flint into a fountain of waters.

In the wilderness, in a dramatic manner, the rock brought forth water, when Moses smote it in anger; here, the rock itself turns to water. In the New Testament, Paul identifies the rock in the wilderness with Christ: "And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ." [1 Corinthians 10:4]

The rock turning to water in the wilderness indicates that the land itself is symbolic, and has a spiritual significance, which is supported in many other Scriptures. The Psalmist wrote, "The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by righteousness." [Psalm 72:3] The mountains here are metaphors; they represent God's promises to his saints, as explained above.

When Abraham went to offer Isaac on the mountain, before he wielded the knife, God prevented him, and he found a ram nearby, caught in a thicket by his horns, and he offered up the ram instead. [Genesis 22:13] The ram was a substitute for his son. Like the ram which was offered instead of Isaac, mountains and hills represent God's promises in prophecy. Similarly, every lamb that was sacrificed in the observance of passover was a symbol representing Christ, the true passover. Like rams and lambs, mountains and hills are symbolic of the spiritual things the saints inherit through Christ.

The land promise to Israel had a spiritual meaning; it typified a "better country," a heavenly, or spiritual one. [Hebrews 11:16] The eternal spiritual promises to the church are represented metaphorically by the land. One of these promises is that the Spirit will guide the church into the truth. The promised land signifies the truth of the gospel. David said, "Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven." [Psalm 85:11]

In Revelation 12:14-16, when the woman flees to the wilderness, the serpent casts a flood after her, that threatens to carry her away, but the earth opens its mouth, and swallows up the flood. The earth is a metaphor; the land of Canaan represents the oracles of God. The sound, spiritual interpretation of the Scriptures swallows up the serpent's flood of confused interpretations. Isaiah wrote, "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose." [Isaiah 35:1]

References

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