

September 13, Ordinary 24A (Exodus 14:19–31; Psalm 114)

Sometimes God changes history by moving oceans, sometimes by making the wheels fall off.

by [Timothy Adkins-Jones](#) in the [September 2026](#) issue

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Exodus 14 is one of the most fantastic passages in all of scripture. It is difficult to read and reread this text without getting lost in the magnificence of the miracle that is present as an angel is flying around, a pillar of cloud is changing places, and waters are subsiding on behalf of the children of Israel. The pillar somehow both lights up the night and gives darkness to the Egyptians. Triumphant, the recently released Hebrew people are walking on dry land into their future. This story is singularly important to our understanding of God's liberating power, and it's a narrative that we return to often. Yet amid the grandeur of the cosmic displays of power, God's liberating work also involves mundane actions of disorientation.

In this passage, the whole of creation bends to the will of a God who desires salvation for God's children. The water flows differently. The wind blows differently. The ground itself dries up. Lightness and darkness are repositioned. The machinations of this miracle harken back to the creation narrative as once again order is brought to chaos, and for the children of Israel it is good. The exodus is a new creation. God not only rescues Israel from Egypt, but God also begins remaking the very world that empire had disordered.

Yet in a way befitting a God who can't be contained, the very means of bringing about that order comes from a kind of chaos of God's own making. God's liberation comes from when God makes everyone lose their bearings. Notice the escalating disorientation in the text. Israel is trapped, with a pursuing Egyptian army behind them and the sea in front of them. This seems like an utterly nonsensical escape route. Holy confusion abounds for Israel. Then the mighty empire has to endure creation's confounding of its pursuit. More confusion. I'd imagine that even as the Israelites made their way across the dry ground, the sight of water being held at bay around them was disorientating. But still they made it through to freedom.

This disorienting, empire-rattling strategy of God's involves simultaneous work on multiple scales. I've already highlighted creation's cosmic reordering. But notice the miracle of the wheel, or maybe better stated, the miracle of the jam. We're told that God clogs the wheels of the chariots. The world's great military force is done in by a lack of lubrication on their transportation. Wonderfully understated—and forgotten in every biblical retelling of this story, including Psalm 114—this minute miracle serves as important inspiration in this moment. Sometimes God changes history by moving oceans. Sometimes God changes history by making the wheels fall off. And often God uses both the fantastic and the mundane. We often expect liberation to arrive through spectacular interventions and feel discouraged by our inability to create these kinds of grand moments of change. But oppressive systems are just as often undone through small, disorienting disruptions: bureaucratic failures, broken routines, courageous refusals, unexpected delays, and seemingly insignificant acts that collectively rob injustice of its momentum.

Psalm 114's remembering of this moment ends with an arresting command: "Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord." It is tempting to imagine the earth cowering in fear before God's overwhelming power, but this misses the deeper movement of the psalm. The earth does not tremble because it is terrified. It trembles because it recognizes its Creator. The mountains skip, the sea flees, and the Jordan turns back not as acts of panic but as

acts of joyful obedience. Creation is finally responding as it was always intended to respond to the One who made it.

That vision reframes what liberation can be. Exodus is not merely the story of escaped slaves; it is the story of reordered creation. Pharaoh's empire had distorted the relationships between humanity, power, and the created world. Under oppression, people become commodities, land becomes a tool of exploitation, and creation itself is conscripted into sustaining systems of death. God's liberating work restores those relationships. Water no longer serves empire but serves God's people. Wind no longer threatens life but opens a path to freedom. Even the earth beneath Israel's feet participates in salvation by becoming dry ground.

In that sense, the crossing of the sea is Genesis happening all over again. Once again, God separates the waters to make space for life to flourish. Once again, chaos gives way to order. Once again, creation becomes the arena in which God declares that life, not death, will have the final word.

Psalm 114 reminds us that liberation is always larger than the rescue of one people. Whenever God acts to free the oppressed, the whole creation begins moving toward its intended harmony. The trembling earth is not simply witnessing Israel's salvation; it is participating in the restoration of the world itself.