

# Exodus 19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Exodus chapter 19 You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him.

All the people answered together and said, All that the Lord has spoken we will do. And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses, Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.

When Moses told the words of the people to the Lord, the Lord said to Moses, Go to the people, and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments, and be ready for the third day.

[ 1 : 3 4 ] For on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, Take care not to go up into the mountain, or touch the edge of it.

Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot, whether beast or man, he shall not live. When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.

So Moses went down from the mountain to the people, and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments. And he said to the people, Be ready for the third day. Do not go near a woman.

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.

Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

[ 2 : 3 9 ] And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

And the Lord said to Moses, Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord, to look, and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them.

And Moses said to the Lord, The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, Set limits around the mountain, and consecrate it. And the Lord said to him, Go down and come up, bringing Aaron with you.

But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them. So Moses went down to the people and told them.

In Exodus chapter 19, God establishes a covenant bond with his people. This is a sort of marriage, as some have seen it. The bond established between God and his people here has been described as a suzerain vassal treaty.

[ 3 : 50 ] It's where a higher ruler establishes a covenant with a lower party. And these were common within the ancient world of the Near East. And yet there is something unique about this, even if it's following a familiar pattern in certain respects.

God is speaking to individuals and to the social body, not just to another king or the rulers of the social body. It's a new covenant order that's established in the life of the covenant people of Abraham.

It's not building something new that's unrelated to what's gone before. Rather, it's building upon a relationship that already exists between God and his people. It establishes the people on a different and a greater footing.

They are being set up as a new nation. And this chapter gives a context for the giving of the law that follows. The law comes from heaven, but it comes at a very specific juncture in history, in a very specific time and place, and to a very specific people.

The events of this chapter begin on the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt. There are a number of ways in which this could be read. We could see this as the third month after the first month on the 15th.

[ 5 : 00 ] Then there was the second month on the 15th. And now this is the third month on the 15th of the month. Or we could see it as the third month. So they left on the 15th of the first month.

Then there was a second month. And now this is the first day of the third month. A further option is to see it exactly three months after they departed. So this would be the 15th day of the fourth month.

Now of these positions, I'm more inclined to accept the idea that this is the first day of the third month. A dating which helps us to understand some of the associations with the events here at Sinai and other dates that are given to us in scripture, which I'll discuss before long.

Israel is here constituted as a people. Sinai is the place where they receive their founding charter and where the new structures of their life are established.

They need to camp in front of the mountain. And Moses had already been at the mountain of God in chapters 3 and 4. He's been here. He's been told that they will worship God at this mountain.

[ 6 : 05 ] So this is a fulfillment of things that he has already been told. This is, among other things, a confirmation to Moses and to others of the validity of his calling.

God announces that he has chosen Israel in particular to relate to him. There is an open-ended commitment between God and his people that is being called for here. They must assent to his law and to his rule within their life.

God describes how he has already related to them and he declares how he will relate to them in the future if they hear his voice and commit themselves to him. First of all, he has brought them on eagles' wings to himself, even though he judged the Egyptians.

The image of the eagle that we have here is the image of a mother eagle taking care for its young and rushing to protect them and to bring them to a particular place with swiftness and care.

And that's how God has related to his people. He has brought them to this point. He has brought Egypt to its knees. He has judged Egypt. But he has shown the most remarkable kindness to his people Israel, bringing them to this place to form them as his own.

[ 7 : 16 ] And he promises that beyond this great deliverance that distinguishes them from all these other peoples, he is going to take Israel as his special possession. All the earth belongs to the Lord and all the peoples.

But among all the peoples of the world, God will take this one particular people. They will be his special possession, his own, his holy possession.

What it means to be holy to the Lord is an important part of this chapter. It requires a form of behaviour that corresponds to it. A priestly purity. God establishes a holy nation.

And Israel is established in this way before it has all of the other distinguishing marks of a nation. They don't have their own land. They don't have their own ruler. They're established in a wilderness.

And as such, they are unique. In Deuteronomy chapter 4 verses 32 to 34, Moses says, For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened, was ever heard of.

[ 8 : 26 ] Did any people ever hear the voice of a God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any God ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?

Israel's origin is unique. It's strange. It's not something that has ever been seen in any other nation. Their identity rests upon God's promise. They don't have a land. They don't have a king.

They don't have all these other marks of nationhood. But what they do have is a promise, and a God who is committed to them, a God who is their king, a God who establishes and guarantees their identity.

Israel's identity does not arise from imminent realities. They're formed in a wilderness. Israel is a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Their identity will be represented by specific parties within the nation.

Israel has Levites, and it has kings later on in its history, and its identity is particularly borne by these parties. They represent Israel to itself, in much the same way as the queen might represent what it means for the United Kingdom to be the United Kingdom.

[ 9 : 49 ] When Israel has priests and when it has kings, it will discover its identity as a kingdom of priests in a fuller way. Their identity at the moment is precarious.

They're a release group of slaves. They don't have a land in which to reside. They don't really have a full ruler. Moses is a prophet who's leading them through the wilderness, but he's not a political ruler in quite the same way as a king would be.

As a nation, their identity very much lies in the future. But it rests upon a promise. God has committed to establishing them as a kingdom of priests. But this statement of them being a kingdom of priests seems to me more than just that they will be a kingdom with priests.

In some way, the Levites represent to Israel what Israel is in relationship to the nations. And what the Levites are within the life of Israel is something that declares Israel's own destiny.

The Levites are scattered throughout the land. They establish God's law within the people. They teach it and they have mastered it themselves. They've understood it and they can pass it on to others.

[ 10 : 58 ] And Israel's destiny is to be that within the world more generally. As Israel's history develops, this is what happens in many ways. They are scattered among the nations. And among the nations, they serve as a sort of priestly people.

A people that point beyond the particularity of a specific nation to the God behind all nations. There are people that have a defining absence at the heart of their life.

They're not defined by a king primarily. They're not defined even by a land primarily. They're defined by the God who's over all peoples, over all lands. And as they're scattered abroad, they do not lose their nationhood.

Rather, their nationhood serves to testify to something beyond all the parochial structures of nationhood that exist in other lands. And as God gives them the law, over time, something else happens.

It's no longer a kingdom with a priestly caste at its heart. A people who study and teach the law to people who do not know it. Rather, it's a people who have more generally studied and learned God's law and can teach it to others.

[ 12 : 04 ] God has revealed his word to the nation of Israel in a unique way. And Israel would grow into a more and more general knowledge of this. As the knowledge of God's law spread not just to a particular caste of priests at its heart.

But to all people. That all of them would know the law. And the Lord that gave the law. And through that knowledge that they would express that priestly character. As people that teach and uphold the law in their own house.

The house of Israel that is maintained by the priests and by each individual Israelite. Extending that priestly vocation both internally in their own lives and then externally out towards the nations.

What happens at Sinai is not just an event for individuals. It's the constitution of a people. It's a political event. This is the founding event of a whole nation.

The nation is founded upon a divine covenant. Which points forward to and places limits upon everything else. This people is not primarily formed upon the consent of the governed.

[ 13 : 11 ] There is an event of consent here. But it's not primarily that which establishes the government. Rather, God's government is recognised and submitted to. That divine government places limits upon all human government.

It also places limits upon nationhood tied to land. They do not yet have a land. God will give them a land. But they do not yet have a land. Their identity as a people rests upon what God is doing with them.

Primarily. Not upon any imminent factor. The people accept Moses' expression of God's message. And then Moses reports this to God. We should note the way that Moses is playing the role of the intermediary here.

It's emphasised. God clearly knows what the people said. But Moses still formally has to declare it to him as a sort of go-between. Moses is the one who's arranging this covenant.

Who's establishing the two parties in relationship with each other. With this expression of covenant, the time is ready for the formal establishment and ratification of the covenant. The covenant ceremony itself.

[ 14 : 16 ] And the declaration of the covenant that occurs in the following chapter. The covenant will also ratify Moses' place as the mediator of the covenant. And they must prepare themselves by maintaining their purity and washing their clothes.

On the third day God will come. And these three days can be associated with trial. With something like Abraham going to Mount Moriah. And at that point God will come down in a theophany and speak to his people.

Thinking about the number of days here. We might notice that there are a lot of similarities with the story of the flood. If you trace the number of days. It would seem that there are two periods of seven days after they first arrive.

And then there's a period of 40 days as Moses goes up the mountain. These are periods that we see in the story of the flood. Maybe we should see a connection between the flood narrative and the establishment of a covenant there.

And the establishment of the covenant on this mountain. It's not Mount Ararat. It's the Mount of Sinai. And God is establishing something that has cosmic significance again. In Moses and the people of Israel we see the seeds of a new world.

[ 15 : 27 ] At this point God demarcates different realms of Sinai. And says that certain places should not be approached. God's presence is in the cloud. The holy of holies as it were.

And Moses can ascend into that. And then there's the lower levels of the mountain. The holy place. Where the priests and the elders could ascend. But not the people. And the people are gathered around the base of the mountain.

As the people gather around in the courtyard of the tabernacle. The seeming association between this ordering of the mountain. And the ordering of the tabernacle. Should alert us to the fact that the tabernacle is in many ways a portable mountain.

When the tabernacle is built. They leave Sinai. And they can have this portable Sinai that they take with them. The same sort of regulations are established for that. God's presence in the holy of holies of the tabernacle.

Is similar to God's presence at the very peak of the mountain. And many of the images that we associate with the mountain. Also come to be associated with the tabernacle. Smoke.

[ 16 : 30 ] Ascending from the sacrifices. The cloud. The cloud of the glory that enters the tabernacle. And the cloud that is also the cloud of smoke and other things. The fire that ascends.

The trumpets that are blown. All these sorts of things. These are signs of God's presence. And they're elements of the tabernacle worship too. The strict laws against trespass apply in both cases.

God's holiness requires a need for barriers and boundaries. Not everything is holy. Much in the world is not holy. There are certain things however that are set apart.

There's one day in seven that is set apart. It's the Sabbath. And there is this particular realm of the Mount of Sinai that is set apart. And later on the tabernacle. Holiness establishes among other things.

Space for God's otherness. In the course of human affairs. If everything were holy. Human beings could not exist. If no place or time were holy however.

[ 17 : 28 ] There would be no way for God to be present with human beings. In the course of their lives. We should maybe think back also to the story of the burning bush. Moses here is bringing a flock to the mountain of God.

And meeting with God there. There are restrictions of holy ground. There's burning and things not being consumed. There's an encounter with and a speaking with God. In this theophanic event.

This is what happened at the burning bush. And it's happening again on a grander scale. Now the shepherd Moses is not bringing sheep. He's bringing the flock of Israel.

The people of Israel. And forming a new covenant with God at this place. A question to consider. Tracing the chronology of the events of Exodus chapter 19.

Many have noted an association between the event of Pentecost. The feast of Pentecost. Established in Leviticus chapter 23 verses 15 following.

[ 18 : 26 ] And the event of Sinai. And the covenant given at Sinai. What are some of the associations that you might see. Between the feast that's given to us. In Leviticus 23. And the events of this chapter. And those that follow.