

UNIT 33  
THE PEOPLE OF GOD  
AT  
THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD  
(Exodus 19:1-25)

**INTRODUCTION<sup>85</sup>**

**Text and Textual Notes**

**19:1** In the third month after the Israelites went out<sup>86</sup> from the land of Egypt, on the very day,<sup>87</sup> they came to the Desert of Sinai. **19:2** After they journeyed<sup>88</sup> from Rephidim they came to the Desert of Sinai, and they camped in

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<sup>85</sup> This chapter is essentially about mediation. The people are getting ready to meet with God and receive the Law from Him and enter into covenant with Him. But all of this required mediation and preparation. But through it all, Israel will become God's unique possession, a kingdom of priests on earth--if they comply with His Law.

The chapter can be divided as follows: verses 1-8 tell how God revealed Himself as the great deliverer of Israel and promised to make them a kingdom of priests; this is followed by God's declaration that Moses would be the mediator (verse 9); then, verses 19-22 record the instructions for Israel to prepare themselves to worship Yahweh, including an account of the manifestation of Yahweh with all the phenomena (16-22); and finally, closes with the mediation of Moses on behalf of the people (verses 24, 25).

The chapter begins the second section of the book. Having been redeemed from Egypt, the people will now be granted a covenant with God. See also R. E. Bee, "A Statistical Study of the Sinai Pericope," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 135 (1972):406-421; and R. B. Y. Scott, "A Kingdom of Priests," *OTS* 8 (1950):213-219.

<sup>86</sup> The construction uses the infinitive construct followed by the subjective genitive to form a temporal clause.

<sup>87</sup> Literally, "on this day"

<sup>88</sup> The form is the preterite with the *waw* consecutive, "and they journeyed." It is here subordinated to the next clause as a temporal clause. But since the action of this temporal clause preceded the actions recorded in verse one, a translation of "after" will keep the sequence in order.

the desert; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain.<sup>89</sup>

**19:3** Moses<sup>90</sup> went up to God, and Yahweh called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and declare to the people<sup>91</sup> of Israel: **19:4** ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I lifted you up on eagles’ wings<sup>92</sup> and brought you to myself.’<sup>93</sup> **19:5** And now, if you will diligently obey me,<sup>94</sup> and keep<sup>95</sup> my covenant, then you will be my<sup>96</sup> special possession<sup>97</sup> out of all the nations, for all the earth is mine. **19:6** And you shall be my<sup>98</sup> kingdom of priests<sup>99</sup> and a holy nation.’<sup>100</sup> These are the words that you

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<sup>89</sup> The mountain is Mount Sinai, the mountain of God, the place where God had met and called Moses, and promised that they would be here to worship Him. If this mountain is Jebel Musa, the traditional site of Sinai, then the plain in front of it would be the plain Er-Rahah, a plain of about a mile and a half long by half a mile wide, fronting the mountain on the NW side (Driver, p. 169). The plain itself is about 5000 feet above sea level.

<sup>90</sup> Literally, “and Moses went up”

<sup>91</sup> This expression is normally translated as “Israelites” in this translation, but because in this place it is parallel to “the house of Jacob” it seemed better to offer a fuller rendering.

<sup>92</sup> The figure compares the way a bird would teach its young to fly and leave the nest with the way Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt. The bird referred to could be one of several species of eagles, but more likely is the griffin-vulture. The image is that of power and love.

<sup>93</sup> The language here is the language of a bridegroom bringing the bride to the chamber. This may be a deliberate allusion to another metaphor for the covenant relationship.

<sup>94</sup> The construction uses the imperfect tense in the conditional clause, preceded by the infinitive absolute from the same verb. The idiomatic meaning of “listen to the voice” means “to obey.” So “hearken diligently” means “diligently obey.”

<sup>95</sup> The verb is the perfect tense with the *waw* consecutive; it continues the idea in the protasis of the sentence: “and [if you will] keep.”

<sup>96</sup> The *lamed* preposition expresses possession here: “to me” means “my.”

<sup>97</sup> The noun is *s<sup>e</sup>gullah*, which means a special possession. Israel was to be God’s special possession; but the prophets will later narrow it to the faithful remnant. All the nations belong to God, but Israel was to stand in a place of special privilege and enormous responsibility. See Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps. 135:4; and Mal. 3:17. See Moshe Greenburg, “Hebrew *s<sup>e</sup>gulla*: Akkadian *sikiltu*,” *JAOS* 71 (1951):172ff.

<sup>98</sup> The preposition is here again taken as a possessive use.

<sup>99</sup> The construction of “a kingdom of priests” means that the kingdom is made up of priests. Kaiser offers four possible renderings of the expression: 1) apposition, viz., “kings, that is, priests; 2) as a construct with a genitive of specification, “royal priesthood”; 3) as a construct with the genitive being the attribute, “priestly kingdom”; and 4) reading with an unexpressed

shall speak to the Israelites.

**19:7** And Moses came and summoned the elders of Israel; and he set before them all these words which Yahweh had commanded him. **19:8** And all the people answered together and said, “All that Yahweh has commanded we will do.”<sup>101</sup> So Moses brought the words of the people back to Yahweh.

**19:9** Then Yahweh said to Moses, “I am going to come<sup>102</sup> to you in a dense cloud,<sup>103</sup> that the people may hear when I speak with you, and will always believe in you.”<sup>104</sup> And Moses told the words of the people to Yahweh. **19:10** And Yahweh said to Moses, “Go to the people and sanctify them<sup>105</sup> today and

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“and”--“kings and priests.” He takes the latter view that they were to be kings and priests (Kaiser, p. 417; other references are R. B. Y. Scott, “A Kingdom of Priests (Exodus xix. 6),” *OTS* 8 [1950]:213-219; William L. Moran, “A Kingdom of Priests,” *The Bible in Current Catholic Thought*, John McKenzie, ed. [NY: Herder and herder, 1962], pp. 7-20). I would think that due to the parallelism of the next description which uses an adjective we are dealing here with a construct relationship, however. This kingdom of God will be comprised of a priestly people. All the Israelites would be living wholly in God’s service, and enjoying the right of access to Him. And, as priests, they would have the duty of representing God to the nations, following what they perceived to be the duties of priests--proclaiming God’s word, interceding for people, and making provision for people to find God through atonement (see Deut. 33:9,10). The emphasis on their being kings does not necessarily derive from this passage that refers to them as a kingdom.

<sup>100</sup> They are also to be “a holy nation.” They are to be a nation separate and distinct from the rest of the nation. Here is another aspect of their duty. It was one thing to be God’s special possession; but to be that they had to be priestly and holy. The duties of the covenant will specify what it would mean to be a holy nation. In short, they had to keep themselves free from everything that characterized pagan people (Driver, p. 171). So it is a bilateral covenant: they received special privileges but they must provide special services by the special discipline. See also Kruse Heinz, “Exodus 19:5 and the Mission of Israel,” *North East Asian Journal of Theology* 24, 25 (1980):239-242.

<sup>101</sup> The verb is the imperfect tense. The people are not being presumptuous in stating their compliance--there are several options open for the interpretation of this tense. It may be classified as a desiderative nuance: “we are willing to do” or, “we **will** do.”

<sup>102</sup> The construction uses the deictic particle and the participle to express the imminent future, what God was about to do. Here is the first announcement of the theophany.

<sup>103</sup> Literally, “the thickness of the cloud”

<sup>104</sup> Since “and also in you” begins the clause, the emphasis must be that the people would also trust **Moses**. See 4:1-9, 31; 14:31.

<sup>105</sup> This verb is the *piel* perfect with the *waw* consecutive; it continues the force of the imperative preceding it. This sanctification would be accomplished by abstaining from things

tomorrow, and make them wash<sup>106</sup> their clothes **19:11** and be ready by the third day, for on the third day Yahweh will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. **19:12** And you shall set boundaries<sup>107</sup> for the people all around, saying, “Take heed<sup>108</sup> to yourselves not to go up on the mountain, neither touch its edge. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. **19:13** No hand shall touch him<sup>109</sup>--but he shall surely be stoned or shot through, whether a beast or a human;<sup>110</sup> he shall not live. When the ram’s horn sounds a long blast they may<sup>111</sup> come up on the mountain.”

**19:14** Then Moses went down from the mountain to the people, and sanctified the people, and they washed their clothes. **19:15** And he said to the people, “Be ready by the third day. Do not go near your wives.”<sup>112</sup> **19:16** And<sup>113</sup> on the third day in the morning there were thunders and lightning and a dense<sup>114</sup> cloud upon the

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that would make them defiled or unclean, and then by ritual washings and ablutions.

<sup>106</sup> The form is the perfect tense, 3cpl, with a *waw* consecutive. It would be instructional as well, but now in the third person it would be more like a jussive, “let them wash, make them wash.”

<sup>107</sup> The verb is the *hiphil* perfect (“make borders”) with a *waw* consecutive, following the sequence of instructions.

<sup>108</sup> The *niphal* imperative (“guard yourselves, take heed to yourselves”) is followed by two infinitives construct that provide the description of what is to be avoided--going up or touching the mountain.

<sup>109</sup> There is some ambiguity here. The clause either means that no man shall touch the mountain, so that if there is someone who is to be put to death he must be stoned or shot since they could not go into the mountain region to get him, or, it may mean no one is to touch the culprit who went in to the region of the mountain.

<sup>110</sup> Literally, “a man”

<sup>111</sup> The nuance here is permissive imperfect, “they may come up.” The ram’s horn would sound the blast to announce that the revelation period was over and it was permitted then to ascend the mountain.

<sup>112</sup> Literally, “do not go near a woman”

B. Jacob notes that as the people were to approach Him they were not to lose themselves in earthly love. Such separations prepared the people for meeting God. Sinai was like a bride, forbidden to anyone else. Abstinence was the spiritual preparation for coming into the presence of the Holy One (p. 537).

<sup>113</sup> Literally, “and it was on”

<sup>114</sup> Literally, “heavy” (*kaved*)

mountain, and the sound of a very loud<sup>115</sup> horn;<sup>116</sup> and all the people who were in the camp trembled. **19:17** And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their place at the lower end of the mountain. **19:18** Now Mount Sinai was completely covered with smoke because Yahweh had descended on it in fire; and its smoke went up like the smoke of a great furnace,<sup>117</sup> and the whole mountain shook<sup>118</sup> greatly. **19:19** When the sound of the horn grew louder and louder,<sup>119</sup> Moses was speaking<sup>120</sup> and God was answering him with a voice.<sup>121</sup>

**19:20** And Yahweh came down on Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain; and Yahweh summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. **19:21** And Yahweh said to Moses, “Go down and solemnly warn<sup>122</sup> the people, lest they force their way through to Yahweh to look, and many of them perish.<sup>123</sup> **19:22** And let the priests also, who draw near to Yahweh, sanctify themselves, lest

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<sup>115</sup> Literally “strong” (*khazaq*)

<sup>116</sup> The word here is *shophar*, the normal word for “horn”; the previous word used in the context was *yobel*, “ram’s horn.” This word is used especially to announce something important in a public event (see 1 Kings 1:34; 2 Samuel 6:15).

<sup>117</sup>The image is that of a large kiln, as in Genesis 19:28.

<sup>118</sup> This is the same word translated “trembled” above.

<sup>119</sup> The active participle *holek* is used to add the idea of “continually” to the action of the sentence; here the trumpet became very loud--continually. See GKC, par. 113u.

<sup>120</sup> The two verbs here (“spoke” and “answered”) are imperfect tenses; they emphasize repeated action but in past time. The customary imperfect usually is translated “would” or “used to” do the action, but here continuous action in past time is meant. Driver translated it “kept speaking” and “kept answering” (p. 172).

<sup>121</sup> The text simply has *b<sup>o</sup>qol*; it could mean “with a voice” or it could mean “in thunder” since “voice” was used earlier for thunder. In this context it would be natural to say that the repeated thunderings were the voice of God--but how is that an answer? Deuteronomy 4:12 says that the people heard the sound of words. Cassuto rightly comments, “He was answering him with a loud voice so that it was possible for Moses to hear His words clearly in the midst of the storm.” He then draws a parallel from Ugaritic where it tells that one of the gods was speaking in a loud voice (pp. 232,3).

<sup>122</sup> The imperative *ha’ed* means “charge” them--put them under oath, or solemnly warn them. God wished to ensure that the people would not force their way past the barriers that had been set out.

<sup>123</sup> Literally, “and fall.”

Yahweh break through<sup>124</sup> against them.” **19:23** And Moses said to Yahweh, “The people are not able to come up to Mount Sinai, because you solemnly warned us,<sup>125</sup> saying, ‘Set boundaries for the mountain and set it apart’.”<sup>126</sup> **19:24** And Yahweh said to him, “Go, get down. And you shall come up, and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people force their way through to come up to Yahweh, lest He break through against them.” **19:25** So Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.<sup>127</sup>

## DEVELOPING THE EXPOSITION

This chapter is essentially about mediation. The people are getting ready to meet with God and receive the Law from Him and enter into their covenant with Him. But all this covenantal association requires mediation. Essentially, God tells the Israelites that they will be His personal possession, that Moses will be the mediator between them and Him, and that they must comply with His Law.

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<sup>124</sup> The verb *yiphrots* is the imperfect tense from *parats*, “to make a breach, to break through.” The image of Yahweh breaking forth on them means “work destruction” (see 2 Sam. 6:8; Driver, p. 174).

<sup>125</sup> The construction is emphatic: “because You--You solemnly warned us.” Moses’ response to God is to ask how they would break through when God had already charged them not to. God knew them better than Moses did.

<sup>126</sup> Literally, “sanctify it”

<sup>127</sup> The passage has many themes and emphases that could be developed in exposition. It could serve for meditation: the theology drawn from the three parts could be subordinated to the theme of holiness: God is holy, therefore adhere to His word for service, approach Him through a mediator, and adore Him in purity and fearful reverence. A developed outline for the exposition could be: I. If the people of God will obey Him, they will be privileged to serve in a unique way (1-8); II. If the people of God are to obey, they must be convinced of the divine source of their commands (9); and finally, III. If the people of God are convinced of the divine approval of their mediator, and the divine source of their instructions, they must sanctify themselves before Him (vv. 10-25). In sum, the manifestation of the holiness of Yahweh is the reason for sanctification and worship.

The correlation is to be made through 1 Peter 2 to the church. The Church is a kingdom of priests; it is to obey the Word of God. What is the motivation for this? Our mediator is Jesus Christ; He has the approval of the Father and manifests the glory of God to us. And He declares the purpose of our calling is to declare His praises. We are to abstain from sin so that pagans can see our good works and glorify God.

*I. The People of God are to become a Kingdom of Priests (1-8).*

The first section (19:1-8) records how God revealed Himself as the great deliverer of Israel and promised to make them His peculiar people and His priests if they would obey. Verse 8 records that they agreed with this: “All that the LORD has spoken we are willing to do” (desiderative imperfect, not presumption). The important things to stress within this portion would include God’s description of himself and his rescue of them from Egypt, his requirements of obedience, and his promises. Israel when obedient would be God’s “peculiar treasure,” “kingdom of priests,” and “holy nation.” Naturally, one would want to compare Peter’s description of the Church in these terms as well. God makes it clear that everyone in the earth belongs to him—but these people would be His priests. The point here is two-sided: obedience is necessary for the service of God, and, God blesses obedience with opportunities of service.

*II. The People of God need a Mediator (9).*

This is followed by God’s declaration of Moses as his mediator through the sign of the dense cloud (19:9). The people would hear God speaking to Moses and trust him (compare Deuteronomy 4).

*III. The People of God must prepare themselves for the Holiness of God (10-25).*

The third section records how the people were to prepare themselves to worship God (19:10-23). Holiness involves purity and separation; so they were to wash their clothes, abstain from sex, for the LORD was coming; they were to avoid coming close to the mountain on fear of death, for the LORD would be there; and when the horn sounded, they could go up to the mountain. All these instructions displayed the great holiness and majesty of the LORD.

In this part verses 16-23 record the manifestation of the LORD. There was smoke and trembling and the voice of the LORD like a trumpet. When Moses spoke, God answered. But before God would deliver the ten

commandments to Moses, he made him go down and warn the people not to break through lest they die. Humans cannot so easily force their way into the presence of God. There is a great change coming in chapter 24 when the people enter into covenant with the LORD.

## CONCLUSION

This message of the passage flows very nicely for a focus on divine revelation—it is the authentication of divine revelation, and it is the starting point for all worship. The theology drawn from the three parts could be subordinated to the theme of the holiness of God:

God is holy, therefore adhere to his word for service,  
approach him through a mediator, and  
adore him in purity and fearful reverence.

The exposition could be entitled, How to Form a Kingdom of Priests. I would work out an outline something like this:

First, If the people of God obey, they will serve him in a unique way in the earth (19:1-8). In short, the condition for service is obedience.

Second (19:9), if the people of God are to obey, they must be convinced of the divine source of their instructions. In short, the divine approval of the mediator is the authentication of the divine source of the commands.

Third (19:10-25), if the people of God are convinced of the divine approval of their mediator and the divine source of their instructions, they must sanctify themselves before him. In short, the manifestation of the holiness of the LORD is the reason for sanctification and reverential worship before him.

Today, we who believe in Christ are also called a chosen holy nation and kingdom of priests (1 Pet. 2). If you want to back up and explain the development, it begins with creation when God created humans to be a royal (rule and have dominion) priesthood (to serve and to keep). But sin destroyed that. So in redemption God seeks to restore humans to their noble calling, and the redeemed people of Israel are to be a kingdom of priests. In time they failed and were expelled from the land; but God in his



grace made a new covenant with them that would pick up all the promises of the several covenants and carry them through to fulfillment in the eschaton. Jesus inaugurated the new covenant in the upper room, and sealed it with his blood on the cross. But of the ten promises of the new covenant, only a couple of them were even partially fulfilled at the first coming. We have been grafted into that covenant, Paul reminds Romans, to make Israel jealous. Paul argues that if Israel's failure is our salvation, think what their restoration will be! So there is still a fulfillment to come of all the promises of the new covenant. In the meantime, we have been grafted in, and Paul said he was born into it prematurely. Thus, we are to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation—not as a replacement of Israel, or a fulfillment of the plan of God, but as members of the new covenant in its early stages.

The development needs to be taught in a series of lessons, for many people have a far too simplistic view of the covenant program of God. But for your purposes in the exposition of Exodus 19, you can lay down the principle of the holy priesthood, and then mention that currently we in the church have been called to this task. And the warning to us Paul says is clear—if God did not spare some of the natural branches, he will not spare us if by unbelief and disobedient we live in defiance of the covenant.

The passage makes it clear that to function as a royal priesthood Israel had to be a holy nation—that brings in all of Leviticus to the implementation.

So what is the requirement for a royal priesthood? We are to obey the word of the LORD, knowing it is the word of the LORD (that is why the epiphany was given to Israel, and it is why Jesus did his glorious ministry in the New Testament—to authenticate the message as divine).

What is the evidence of our obedience? We sanctify ourselves and worship in reverence.

What is the inspiration for our obedience and our worship? Our mediator, Jesus Christ, has the approval of the Father, and manifests the glory of God to us.

Peter seems to be drawing other parallels with this passage as well. He declares that the purpose of our election is that we should declare his

praises, for he is the one who called us out of darkness (1 Peter 2:9). We are to abstain from sinful desires (v. 11), so that pagans may see the good works and glorify God on the day he visits us.

For anyone going into ministry, or trying to understand this biblical theme of the people of God being a royal priesthood, there is a little book that is important to have and read frequently:

T. F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood, A Theology of Ordained Ministry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993.