



## Exodus - Chapter Nineteen

### Summary of Chapter Nineteen

At the start of the third month, just seven weeks after the Israelites had left Egypt, they arrived at Mount Sinai. God summoned Moses to the mountain and instructed him to tell the Israelites that, if they would keep the commandments of God, then they would be his treasured possession out of all the nations on earth. Moses reported this to the elders of Israel. They too would be able to hear the voice of God when he spoke with Moses.

Moses was told to consecrate the people over the coming two days for on the third day the Lord would come to his people. They were instructed not to set foot on the mountain or face death for doing so.

On the third day there was a tremendous blast of a trumpet that made the people tremble and Moses brought them out to the foot of the mountain and they saw God descend on the mountain in fire and thick smoke. God called Moses onto the mountain and told him to return to the people to warn them that they must not venture onto the mountain. Even the priests could not stand before God unless they had been consecrated.

### II. Exodus 19:1-40:38 - The Covenant at Sinai

The second half of Exodus focuses on the events at Mount Sinai and the content of the law revealed to Moses. The narrative includes: the preparation of the people (19:1-25); the Ten Commandments and other laws (20:1-23:19); the instructions for entering the land (23:20-33); the confirmation of the covenant (24:1-18); the instructions relating to the tabernacle (25:1-31:18 and 35:1-3); the breach, intercession, and renewal of the covenant (32:1-34:35); and the assembling of the tabernacle (35:4-40:38).

## II.a Exodus 19:1-25 - Setting: Sinai

Israel arrives at Sinai, where the rest of the events of Exodus will take place and where the Lord will reveal his covenant through Moses. Chapter 19 focuses on the instructions that the Lord gives to Moses in order to prepare Israel for his presence at Mount Sinai.



Mount Sinai

If the traditional site of Mount Sinai looks like anything, it looks like a huge pulpit - a sudden, steep outcropping of mountain out in the wilderness. Here, God preached one of the most dramatic sermons ever heard.

There is good reason to believe that the traditional site of Mount Sinai - on the Sinai Peninsula - is not the correct location of the mountain where all this came to pass.

- According to Exodus 2:15, 3:1 and 3:12 this mountain was in the region of Midian, which was on the east side of the Gulf of Aqaba, east of the Sinai Peninsula. The ancient land of Midian is in the modern nation of Saudi Arabia.
- In Galatians 4:25, the Apostle Paul clearly described Mount Sinai as being in Arabia. Although some claim that this can also be understood as extending to the Sinai Peninsula, this is not the normal understanding of where Arabia is, either in the modern or the ancient understanding.

- There is significant evidence - both historic and archaeological - to associate the Arabian mountain Jebel al-Lawz with the site of Mount Sinai.



Jebel el Lawz



Location of Jebel el Lawz

## II.a.i Exodus 19:1-9a - The Israelites Reach Mount Sinai

The people of Israel reach Mount Sinai and Moses is summoned before God. He is given instructions that the people are to remember what God has done in bringing them out of Egypt and that, if they obey him, they will be his treasured possession.

<sup>1</sup> At the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. <sup>2</sup> They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites:

### Exodus 19:1-3

At the third new moon puts their arrival at Sinai about seven weeks after the Passover. This coincides with the Festival of Weeks (Pentecost), which among other things celebrates the giving of the law (Leviticus 23:15-21), and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-36).

When Israel comes to the wilderness of Sinai and camps in front of the mountain (vv.1-2), it is the fulfilment of the sign the Lord promised to Moses at the Burning Bush – that he would bring the people out of Egypt and they would <<*worship God on this mountain*>> (3:12). Israel stayed in the wilderness of Sinai until Numbers Chapter 10. More than 57 chapters of Scripture are devoted to what happened to Israel in the year they camped at Mount Sinai.

Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain. Moses, led by God, went up on the mountain to meet with God as he had before, and the Lord spoke to Moses again.

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob. With this title God associated the nation with the weakest and least stable of the patriarchs. At this point they acted more like Jacob than like Abraham or Isaac. It also distinguishes them from the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau, many of whom would perpetually battle against Israel and still do today!

<sup>4</sup> You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup> Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, <sup>6</sup> but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'

#### Exodus 19:4-6

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. God gave a message to Israel through Moses, a message regarding his purpose and destiny for Israel. This destiny was based on what God already did for them in their great deliverance from Egypt.

I bore you on eagles' wings. An eagle's wings are strong and sure; but they also speak of careful protection: <<***but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint***>> (Isaiah 40:31). It is said that an eagle does not carry her young in her claws like other birds; the young eagles attach themselves to the back of the mother eagle and are protected as they are carried. Any arrow from a hunter must pass through the mother eagle before it could touch the young eagle on her back. This metaphor is developed most extensively in: <<***As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him; no foreign god was with him***>> (Deuteronomy 32:11-12), where the loving compassion, protection, strength, and watchfulness of God is compared with the majestic bird's attributes.

The deliverance I bore you on eagles' wings was for fellowship, i.e. brought you to myself. God did not deliver Israel so they could live apart from God, but so they could be God's people.

If you obey my voice and keep my covenant. The Lord calls Israel to be faithful to his covenant even before he has revealed all of its particulars. What they have seen in Egypt reminds them that God's covenant relationship with them is prior to and essential for their living as his people. The covenant is greater than the law.

The covenant God made with Israel involved law, sacrifice, and the choice to obey and be blessed or to disobey and be cursed: *<<I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob>>* (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

You shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. God intended for Israel to be a special treasure unto him. He wanted them to be a people with a unique place in God's great plan, a people of great value and concern to God. It was not as if God ignored the rest of the world (for all the earth is mine), but that he was determined to use Israel to reach the earth. The Apostle Paul also wanted Christians to know how great a treasure they were to God; he prayed they would know *<<what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints>>* (Ephesians 1:18b).

When the Lord calls Israel a priestly kingdom and a holy nation, he is not referring exclusively to the role that Aaron and his sons will fill as priests (28:1), but also to what Israel's life as a whole is to represent among the nations. By keeping the covenant, the people of Israel would continue both to set themselves apart from, and also to mediate the presence and blessing of the Lord to, the nations around them: *<<I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed>>* (Genesis 12:3), and: *<<You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!>>* (Deuteronomy 4:6). When Peter applies these terms to the church: *<<Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner', and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light>>* (1 Peter 2:4-9), he is explaining that the mixed body of Jewish and Gentile believers inherit the privileges of Israel, and he is calling the believers to persevere in faithfulness so that those around them *<<may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge>>* (1 Peter 2:12b).

The apostle makes a similar statement in his address to the church: <<John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen>> (Revelation 1:4-6).

<sup>7</sup> So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. <sup>8</sup> The people all answered as one: 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.' Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. <sup>9a</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.'

#### Exodus 19:7-9a

Set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. The people are later challenged to receive the covenant again, after they heard its terms, and they received it once more; refer to Exodus 24:1-8.

That the people may hear when I speak with you. The sights and sounds of the Lord's presence on Mount Sinai are emphasised throughout the section and were to signify further that Moses was the one through whom the Lord was revealing his word to Israel.

#### II.a.ii Exodus 19:9b-25 - The People Consecrated

God provides the instructions for Moses to ensure the people are properly prepared for their momentous meeting with God on the mountain. They are to be clean and are to observe the strict boundaries set on pain of death. Their experience of meeting with God in this way was truly terrifying for them.

<sup>9b</sup> When Moses had told the words of the people to the Lord, <sup>10</sup> the Lord said to Moses: 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes <sup>11</sup> and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. <sup>12</sup> You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, "Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. <sup>13</sup> No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows;

whether animal or human being, they shall not live.” When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain.’

### Exodus 19:9b-13

Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Through the instructions to consecrate the people (vv.10-11) and to set limits (vv.12-13), the Lord is preparing Israel for the pattern of worship that will be embodied in the tabernacle (26:31-37). The mountain is to be set apart because it will be made holy by the Lord’s presence on it. The Hebrew verb translated ‘consecrate’ is literally ‘to set apart as holy’ and indicates that Moses is to prepare Israel to come before a holy God. While most of the specifics are not given, the call to wash their clothes indicates that consecration includes setting aside or altering aspects of daily living in preparation to meet God.

No hand shall touch them. Any person or animal killed for getting too close would be regarded as so unholy they could not even be touched; they had to be executed with stones or arrows.

When the trumpet sounds a long blast. The people could only come near at God’s invitation, and the trumpet signalled that the invitation was open. At the sounding of the trumpet they could come up to the boundaries, but not beyond them.

If there is anything basic to human nature, it is that boundaries are needed. In setting these boundaries and providing the death penalty for breaching them, God showed Israel that obedience is more important than their feelings. No doubt some bold Israelites felt like going beyond the boundaries, but they were to submit their feelings to obedience.

<sup>14</sup> So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. <sup>15</sup> And he said to the people, ‘Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman.’

### Exodus 19:14-15

He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. The people immediately prepared for the revelation of God that was promised for the third day. This is a foretaste of an even greater ‘third day’ event: <<*Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem*>> (Luke 24:45-47).

Prepare for the third day. The meeting with God could only come on the third day. God promised to reveal himself on the third day, and they had to wait for it.

It is not clear whether the instruction to not go near a woman was included in or implied by the Lord's instruction to Moses. The purpose of consecration indicates that the rationale likely includes abstaining from sex as an aspect of setting oneself apart to meet with God, as confirmed by Leviticus 15:16-18, not because of anything presumed to be inherently unacceptable in either sex or women. The law shows that the issue of or contact with bodily fluids makes a person unclean.

<sup>16</sup> On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup> Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. <sup>19</sup> As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. <sup>20</sup> When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

#### Exodus 19:16-20

All the sights (lightning, as well a thick cloud, smoke and fire), and sounds (thunder and the blast of the trumpet) signify the Lord's presence; the experience was to be a continual reminder to Israel that the Lord had spoken directly to Moses.

Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. At the sound of the trumpet, Moses led the people up to the barrier at the base of Mount Sinai, where they could see, smell, hear, and virtually taste the fire which covered the mountain, as well as feel the earth shake under their feet when the whole mountain shook violently.

As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder. In the midst of all this, the sound of the trumpet blast became longer and louder and longer and louder, until Moses spoke to God, and God would answer him in thunder. Collectively, Israel heard the Lord God speak from Mount Sinai in an audible voice, just as many in Jerusalem did in Jesus' day: <<*The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.'* Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine'>> (John 12:29-30).

The Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. God came in a special presence to Mount Sinai, ready to meet with Moses as a representative of the whole nation of Israel.

God came down, and Moses went up. As the people trembled in terror at the foot of the mountain, Moses needed courage to go to the top and meet with God. It took courage for Moses to go up in the midst of all the thunder, lightning, earthquakes, fire, and smoke. Yet Moses knew God, not only in terms of this awesome power, but also in terms of his gracious kindness.

<sup>21</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down and warn the people not to break through to the Lord to look; otherwise many of them will perish.

<sup>22</sup> Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves or the Lord will break out against them.’ <sup>23</sup> Moses said to the Lord, ‘The people are not permitted to come up to Mount Sinai; for you yourself warned us, saying, “Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy.”’ <sup>24</sup> The Lord said to him, ‘Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to the Lord; otherwise he will break out against them.’ <sup>25</sup> So Moses went down to the people and told them.

### Exodus 19:21-25

Go down and warn the people. Those who through rebellion, curiosity, or simple daring presumed to go up on the mountain would perish. The glory and greatness of God was not to be a matter subjected to scientific inquiry or a way to prove one’s own manhood.

The reference to the priests precedes the Lord’s instructions that Aaron and his sons will fill the role. If Aaron’s sons are being referred to here, they are grouped together with the people as those who are restricted from coming up on to the mountain beyond the boundaries that had been established.

Break out against them means that God will kill them for their blatant disobedience against his command for them not to come onto the mountain; this is confirmed by similar transgressions: <<*Now Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord*>> (Leviticus 10:1-2), and: <<*When they came to the threshing-floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it. The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God. David was angry because the Lord had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah; so that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day*>> (2 Samuel 6:6-8).

Hebrews 12:18-24 says clearly that under the New Covenant believers come to a different mountain, that their salvation and relationship with God is centred at Mount Zion, and not Mount Sinai:

- Sinai speaks of fear and terror; but Zion speaks of love and forgiveness.
- Sinai is in a dry desert; but Zion is the city of the Living God.
- Sinai, with all its fear and power is earthly; but the Mount Zion a believer comes to is heavenly and spiritual.
- At Sinai, only Moses could come and meet God; at Zion, there is an innumerable company, a general assembly.
- Sinai had guilty people in fear; but Zion has just people made perfect.
- At Sinai, Moses is the mediator; but at Zion, Jesus is the mediator.
- Sinai put forth an old covenant, ratified by the blood of animals; Zion has a new covenant, ratified by the blood of God's precious Son.
- Sinai was all about barriers and exclusion; Zion is all about invitation.
- Sinai is all about law; Zion is all about grace.