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The setting of the giving of the law (Exodus 19:1–25)

Introducing the theme (Exodus 19:1–6)

Now that Israel has arrived at Mount Sinai, God calls Moses onto the mountain in order to establish a covenant with the Hebrews. A covenant may be defined as ‘a bond in blood sovereignly administered’.¹ It is a binding contract between God and man, one that God has initiated and administered. The treaty involves promises on God’s part and obligations on man’s part. The extent of the covenant embraces the very extremes of life and death. This opening passage describes God’s establishment of the Mosaic covenant with Israel.

19:1. *In the third month after the children of Israel came out from the land of Egypt, on this day they came to the wilderness of Sinai.*

This section does not begin with either a *waw* consecutive or a

waw conjunctive (i.e., English ‘and’), which is the common Hebrew way to link a section with previous material.² The absence of either form suggests just the opposite: here is a decisive break from the preceding narrative. Verse 1 serves as a geographical caption, or superscription, for the remainder of the book of Exodus. All subsequent events related in the book occur in ‘*the wilderness of Sinai*’.

The location of the Hebrew encampment at the mountain and in Sinai is unknown. Many suggestions have been proposed, but we shall not take time to review them here.³

19:2. *And they travelled from Rephidim, and they came to the wilderness of Sinai. And they encamped in the wilderness. And Israel camped there in front of the mountain.*

Verse 1 was a general statement that Israel left Egypt and has now entered the Sinai desert. Verse 2 gives greater detail to the later part of that journey, and it summarizes where chapter 18 had ended. In Exodus chapters 17–18, the Hebrews were at the site of Rephidim—there they grumbled due to lack of water (17:1–7), and there they fought against the Amalekites (17:8–16). They then went into the Sinai wilderness and they pitched camp ‘*in front of the mountain*’. That had also occurred in Exodus 18:5, where the Israelites are already pictured as dwelling in front of ‘the mountain of God’. This mountain is Horeb, where Moses first met God at the event of the burning bush (3:1).

The precise route of the exodus from Egypt to Mount Sinai/Horeb is difficult to determine. It appears that the initial stages of Israel’s escape from Egypt followed a southerly direction, beginning at Rameses (probably Tell el-Dab’a) and concluding at the Gulf

of Suez. At the Red Sea, the Hebrews turned eastward, crossed through the waters, and entered into the Sinai Peninsula.⁴

19:3–4. *And Moses went up to God, and Yahweh called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and you shall tell the children of Israel: “You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you on wings of eagles and brought you to me.”’*

As the people camp at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses ascends the mountain. There God speaks to him and tells him to speak to the Hebrews. Moses is thus to serve as the mediator between Yahweh and Israel. And, since the central part of the speech is a covenantal treaty, as we shall see below, Moses is thus called to play the part of the covenant mediator.

The message Moses is to proclaim is a threefold statement of the historical context of the Sinai meeting. First, Yahweh relates how he *had punished the unbelieving Egyptians*, and how Israel had witnessed it. The independent personal pronoun, ‘*you*’ (plural), is used in an emphatic sense here—the idea is that the Hebrews actually did see Egypt’s destruction by Yahweh. Secondly, God tells how *he rescued Israel and he bore them up like an eagle*.⁵ And, finally, he explains that *he brought the Hebrews to himself* at Sinai.

This review of Yahweh’s past relationship with Israel is to demonstrate the biblical doctrine of election. That is to say, the Lord freely chose to redeem Israel and to destroy Egypt. He was in no way coerced to do it. But he called forth and elected Israel to be his people, and to be in covenant with him.

In these verses we see the first two steps in the structure of a biblical covenant.⁶ The opening phase is the *preamble*, in which the overlord (suzerain) identifies himself and initiates the covenant. The

second phase is the *historical prologue*: in it Yahweh recounts the past relationship between Israel and himself.

19:5–6. “*And now if you truly obey my voice and you keep my covenant, then you will be to me a possession among all the peoples, because all the earth belongs to me; and you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*”
These are the words you shall speak to the children of Israel.’

In these two verses we encounter the third step of a covenant agreement—*stipulations*.⁷ It is structured according to an ‘if ... then’ clause. God requires Israel to keep the covenant by obeying his commandments. The ‘*truly obey*’ of this passage is an infinitive absolute before an imperfective of the same verb; the repetition is for the purpose of accentuating the condition upon which the consequence depends. The specific commands, or stipulations, of the covenant are detailed in chapters 20–23, the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant.

If Israel is obedient, great blessings are promised to them. First, Israel will distinctly belong to Yahweh. The Hebrew word for ‘*possession*’ (*s^e gulāh*) literally means ‘a special treasure’. The term commonly refers to something that belongs personally to a king, and that has been put aside by him for a particular use (1 Chr. 29:3; Eccles. 2:8).

Secondly, Israel in covenant with God will be ‘*a kingdom of priests*’. The Hebrews are chosen to fulfil an exalted spiritual task: they will be a people of priests, in the sense that they will occupy among all humanity a position of priesthood. Thus, they will be a light to the nations of what is good, right and true—they will be priestly ambassadors of Yahweh!

Israel as a covenant community will be made into a kingdom. Prior to this time, the idea of the people of God as a kingdom, or a

nation, was merely a promise to the patriarchs. Now in the Mosaic age that promise will come to fruition.

Finally, Israel will be ‘*a holy nation*’. The Hebrew word *qadôsh* (‘holy’) literally means ‘set apart/distinct/unique’. It is an elective term, meaning that Israel has been chosen and set apart by Yahweh into covenant. No other nation or kingdom upon earth could make that claim!

Application

These three blessings still apply to the people of God today. The apostle Peter tells his readers, ‘But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (1 Peter 2:9). Peter is speaking to the elect, but the elect who have been chosen in Christ. The letter is addressed to Christians: ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’ (1 Peter 1:3).

Thus, Peter declares who we are and what we are to do. As Clowney remarks, ‘Peter’s declaration of our “peoplehood” in Christ has vast consequences for the life of the church in Christ. The church is not just a religious association formed by saved individuals to give united expression to their faith. Rather, the church is more a people than Israel was under the old covenant.’⁸ The church is the new Israel, and all the promises to the Israel of old find meaning and fulfilment in the church.

Prepare to meet your God, O Israel! (Exodus 19:7–15)

Yahweh has made some wonderful covenant promises to the people