

DHW

## *LESSON 16*

# THE BOOK OF EXODUS

## Chapter 19

### *INTRODUCTION*

After three months since their departure from Egypt, the children of Israel were in the wilderness of Sinai where they camped at the foot of a mountain. This chapter is significant in the sense that it marks a high point in God's covenant relationship with the children of Israel. God had delivered them from the oppression in Egypt and stupendously took them across the Red Sea on dry ground. He succoured them in their journeys in the wilderness until they reached the wilderness of Sinai. Here on top of the mountain, the LORD God rehearsed His covenant which He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and now in extension it

included the children of Israel. The covenant was reiterated through the LORD'S chosen leader, Moses.

Another significant point is that the LORD God initiated the revelation of His holiness and glory. If God had not revealed His true nature to the children of Israel, we could never know Him as we should. God taught the children of Israel how they should relate to Him. They should not take the LORD their God for granted. The same should apply to us as well, as many Christians today do not seem to fear and revere Him as they should.

God's revelation of Himself to the children of Israel is known as a *theophany*. It is a compound word, *theo*, meaning God and *phanos*, meaning visible. Can a man see God and live? God Himself answers (Exodus 33:20) *And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.* We shall learn how the Almighty God made this possible – He appeared to Moses

and before the children of Israel and yet they all lived.

Another revelation is that God showed the reason why He chose Israel as a nation above the others. The children of Israel were given the privilege and the responsibility to preach and teach the Word of God and salvation to the rest of the world. Israel as a nation has a special position in the world.

The following is an outline of the chapter:

- 1) The LORD God reiterated His covenant relationship with the children of Israel (19:1-6);
- 2) The children of Israel responded spontaneously to the words of the LORD (19:7-9);
- 3) The LORD intended to come down on Mount Sinai before the children of Israel (19:10-15);
- 4) The appearance of the LORD was awesome and majestic (19:16-19);

- 5) The LORD warned the children of Israel not to overstep the boundary separating Him from them (19:20-25).

### ***STUDY THE WORD***

#### **The LORD'S Covenant Relationship**

True to His promise, God led Moses and the children of Israel to a mountain in the wilderness of Sinai.<sup>1</sup> This mountain was Mount Sinai or Mount Horeb. The children of Israel camped at the foot of that mountain. God had told Moses before that He would lead them to the place. - *And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of*

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 3:12 *And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.* The wilderness of Sinai would be the area surrounding the mountain. It must not be confused with the wilderness of Shur (Exodus 15:22—the stretch of desert on north western part of the Sinai peninsula, east of Egypt); *and the wilderness of Sin* (Exodus 16:1—that stretch of desert between the wilderness of Shur and Sinai)..

*Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain* (Exodus 3:12). God had fulfilled His promise.

Moses made frequent trips up and down the mountain to convey God's Word to the children of Israel and then to convey the Israelites' response to God. Moses served like a mediator between them.

Moses went up to the mountain, possibly the highest mountain in Sinai to commune with God. The LORD God had a word to tell to the children of Israel through Moses. Israel must remember how God had borne them *on eagles' wings* and brought them unto Himself. The use of the image of eagles by God as a symbol is interesting. The eagle is both impressive in size, power and majesty among all the other birds. It displays a fearsome beauty. It is most appropriately used here by God to project His image of One who delivered Israel powerfully from bondage in Egypt and succoured the children of Israel

through their journey in the wilderness to Sinai.

God made a covenant with Israel through Moses here in Sinai. In making the covenant, God clearly and firmly stipulated the conditions to be undertaken by the children of Israel. They must obey whatever God told them to do, thus keeping His covenant. Hearing God's Word was not enough; they must be doers of His Word. The fact that God punctuated with the phrase *for all the whole earth is mine* (19:5) was to show that of all the nations in the world God only made a covenant with the nation of Israel despite their weaknesses and littleness. And in order that they might enjoy the blessings from God, they must remain faithful by keeping the covenant.

The rewards for obeying and keeping God's covenant were threefold. Firstly, the children of Israel would be *a peculiar treasure*, meaning a special treasure unto God above all the other nations of the world. Secondly, they would be *a*

*kingdom of priests* and hence *an holy nation* unto God (v.6). This covenant must be clearly understood in the context of the covenant God had made with Abraham (Genesis 17:1-8). The covenant in Sinai was not a new covenant which God made with the nation Israel. God had already declared that Israel is special to Him, even His first-born (Exodus 4:22).<sup>2</sup> The covenant made here was an extension of the Abrahamic covenant. Note that the call of commitment on the part of Israel was not a pre-requisite qualification for God's choice of them as His chosen people. Israel was not chosen on the basis of the merits of the people. On the contrary the people were chosen not because they were great and powerful. If these were the qualifications, Egypt would be the better candidate. But Israel was very small in number in fact the *fewest of all people* (Deuteronomy

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<sup>2</sup>Exodus 4:22 *And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn.*

*DHW LESSON 16 EXODUS 19 7:7).*<sup>3</sup> The LORD God chose the nation Israel simply on the basis that He loved them! Therefore, the conditional “if” clause is not a requirement for Israel's status as God's chosen people. The conditional clause served to describe what the relationship to God necessitates. In other words, *what does it mean to be God's redeemed people in the world.*<sup>4</sup>

Now the nation Israel would be a treasured possession, *a kingdom of priests* and *an holy nation*, provided they obeyed and kept His Word. This promise to nation Israel was conditional upon their commitment and obedience to God's covenant and voice (word). This entailed not only circumcision but all subsequent commands that God would give as they went along. If nation Israel obeyed God, God would bless them and they would be called upon to bear the purpose God intended for them

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<sup>3</sup>Deuteronomy 7:7 *The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people.*

<sup>4</sup>Fretheim, 213.

to the rest of the world. As a *kingdom of priests*, they would serve in a mediatorial role between God and the other nations. They were entrusted with the knowledge of the LORD God to teach all nations. They were to be *an holy nation*. They were to be set apart unto God for His use. This purpose of God for Israel to the other peoples of the earth was strongly suggested by the phrase *for all the earth is mine* (v.5b). God's sovereignty and rule encompassed the whole world. Israel was called to be the special people of God for God's intended purpose for the entire inhabitants of the earth.

### **The Response of the Children of Israel**

Moses, having heard the Word of God, immediately descended from the mountain top, summoned all the elders of the Israelites, and repeated all that GOD had told him. The people in unison pledged that *All that the LORD had spoken, we will do*. Moses then returned to the top of the mountain and reported

whatever the people had spoken to him.

The LORD said to Moses that He would *come down* to him in the midst of the people. The people would be able to hear that the LORD God spoke directly with Moses. The people would then believe in Moses.

Observe the LORD'S declaration that He would *come down*. This was always the way – *the LORD come down*, and not the people went up. Man is incapable of reaching out to God because He is holy and transcendent. Unless the LORD God condescended to reveal Himself by coming to us, we would never have known Him!

### **The Descent of God on Mount Sinai**

The appearance of God as described in this chapter is a *theophany*.<sup>5</sup> One should not have the idea that an appearance of God must be confined to the physical

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<sup>5</sup> Greek, *theophany*, a compound of two words: "*theo*" which means "God," and *phaneros* which means to "reveal, make known."

and visible. God is a Spirit<sup>6</sup>, and according to the Lord Jesus Christ, *a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have* (Luke 24:39). Although God did not appear in a physical form, it should not be thought less of a *theophany*. The presence of God was transcendent rather than the details of His physical form that men often crave or curious to see.

God instructed Moses to prepare the people three days before His appearance on the mount. The LORD required that the children of Israel be sanctified and their clothes be washed (19: 10, 11). This requirement to consecrate and to wash their clothes before they would meet God tells us about the nature and character of God. God is holy. He demands that His people be holy as He is holy. The idea taught by some that God is “chummy” must be utterly rejected. Similarly, God should not be taken for granted.

Although the love of God has been emphatically preached and taught, the holiness of God is equally true and important. God made it clear that He should not be approached by men in a casual and careless attitude and manner. By sanctifying or consecrating themselves the people were required to formally set themselves apart from their daily affairs, and be prepared to meet God. God added another restriction. He imposed on the children of Israel a boundary around the mountain over which they should not cross. If they came near the mountain and stepped over it, the penalty was death. The message was simple and clear. This reveals that God is transcendent; it means He is separate and unique from all His creation. It is His otherness. While we are familiar with His immanence (nearness) we must remember that He is transcendent (separate and unique).

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<sup>6</sup> John 4:24 *God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.*

## The Awesome Appearance of the LORD

The appearance of God on Mount Sinai was awesome, glorious and majestic. God came down *in the morning and there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount* (19:16).<sup>7</sup> And there was *the voice* (sound) *of the trumpet*. This trumpet was not a brass, silver or golden trumpet which we know but it was a *shofar*, a ram's horn. In all probability, it was blown by an angel and he blew it very loudly so that the children of Israel could hear and they *trembled* (Hebrew, *charad*). They were shaking. God hid Himself in the midst of the thick clouds and the sound of the thundering, lightnings and the horn of the ram! And the top of Mount Sinai was smoky and there was fire burning red bright and the

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 97:2 *Clouds and darkness are round about him: righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne.*

Matthew 17:5 *While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.*

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mountain was *quaking* (Hebrew, *charad*).

And only Moses could ascend to the mountain to meet with God and talk to Him. This certainly authenticated the leadership of Moses. God had chosen Moses to be the mediator between Him and the children of Israel. God worked through His specially chosen leader. In this way, He authenticated the standing of Moses before the children of Israel. And Moses, on the other hand, was not proud and arrogant having been vindicated by the LORD God, but humble and meek.

### God Warns the Children of Israel

The first thing that God told Moses when He came down onto the mountain was to charge the children of Israel not to break through the restriction boundary around the mountain in order to gaze at the LORD lest they be perished (19:21). The priests also were not allowed to step beyond the boundary. When Moses tried to explain that the children of

Israel had already been told that they would not break through the boundary, the LORD commanded him, *Away, get thee down* (Hebrew literally, you go down, go . . . 19:24). It was to remind the children of Israel not to break through the cordon. The LORD could see that the children of Israel were curious and might be tempted to take a look at God by going nearer to the mountain. That would be disastrous for them. God was merciful and cared for His people that they should not be struck dead unnecessarily. The LORD also told Moses that when he returned to the mountain top he could bring with him Aaron, his brother.

Moses went down and spoke to the people. In all this going up and down the mountain, conveying the message of the LORD to the children of Israel and vice-versa, Moses accommodatingly obeyed.

### *PRACTICAL VALUE*

When God reminded Moses to tell the children of Israel not to

break through the permitted perimeter, He was being repetitious or long-winded. The LORD is no respecter of persons and anyone who transgresses His law is liable to be punished and in this case the penalty is death. When Moses tried to explain that the people would not since they had already been told, the LORD was insistent that Moses should go down immediately – *go, you, go*. It seems that Moses could have been tired of going up and down the mountain for so many times. But here the LORD knew better for He knew the hearts and minds of men. Our LORD God is merciful and He cares for us.

The LORD made the children of Israel to be *a kingdom of priests* and to be *an holy nation*. This was Israel's special position among the nations of the world. As priests, Israel was to bring the message of the fear of God and His holiness, grace, love and mercy to the people of the world calling them to repent and to turn to the living and true God. In this

respect, Israel has so far failed and God has called the Church in Christ Jesus to bring the same message of repentance, salvation and hope to the world. As Christians belonging to the Church of Christ, let us be obedient to our Lord Jesus Christ. We should be grateful for others who had brought the Word of truth and salvation to us. Today, every believer is a member of the royal priesthood of Christ preaching and teaching the Word of God to others that they might know God and believe and be saved.

One very important lesson is that we must re-orient our knowledge and thoughts about God. Many Christians have been fed with the idea that God is love, gracious and merciful. Indeed, these attributes are still the truth. But that is only one side of the coin of truth. The other side is the holiness, righteousness and justice of God. In this chapter we learn this precious truth about the transcendence of God. As the children of Israel must approach

God with a sense of reverence, respect and awe, we too must approach in like-manner. How many Christians have taken God for granted! When we present ourselves for worship of the living and true God, the Almighty LORD God, the Creator of the Universe and considering all His moral attributes, how can we dress shabbily and casually? In addition, when we attend worship services, are we fulfilling our responsibility and duty to meet the LORD God punctually? And having this kind of attitude towards the LORD God, when we need help of any kind, do we not feel bad about asking or expecting or even demanding that God should come to our rescue or answer our prayers in the way we want it?

Unless we are convinced of the reality of God, His moral uprightness, His immanence and transcendence, we will not have spiritual power in our life. It is not surprising then that our prayers are not heard. AMEN