



Sunday School Lesson
Exodus 19
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A Covenant is Established



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The Sunday School lesson in the Formations series focuses on “A God Who Acts in Time” with an emphasis upon the idea of ‘covenant’ and uses the Exodus 19 passage for this emphasis. This Old Testament scripture passage narrates the arrival of the children of Israel under Moses’ leadership at Mt. Sinai after their departure from Egypt, and their consecration for the reception of the divine Torah (Law) that God would give to Moses on the mountain.

The name of the book, Exodus, is derived from the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible called the Septuagint (LXX), which uses the title ἔξοδος [exodos, “going out”] for this document. The Hebrew text simply calls the document “and these are the names” [וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹתַי]. G.E. Wright in the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (s.v., “Exodus, Book of”) has a helpful summation:

The second book of the OT, which receives its name from the LXX designation of the chief event recorded in it — namely, Israel’s “going out” of Egypt. In the Jewish canon it is the second book of the Law (Torah, contained in the Pentateuch). In Christian exegesis the events of deliverance from slavery and the covenant at Sinai have received more attention than the law contained in the book, particularly because they have provided a language for comprehending the Atonement (God’s “deliverance” in Christ) and the New Covenant. For Israel the events recorded in the book were a testimony to the work of God in fulfillment of promise whereby she became the “people of Yahweh,” saved from Egyptian slavery, bound together in covenant with her Lord, and provided with a cultic center (tabernacle and ark of the covenant) which gave assurance of God’s “tabernacling” presence in her midst (see §§ 1c, 4c, below).

I. Context

Both contexts of this passage are important to correct understanding of the meaning of the scripture. Thus, we’ll give some attention to these as a foundation for the study of the text itself.

a. Historical

As is typically the case with most of the books in the Old Testament, the external history -- who wrote it, when, where, why, to whom -- is clouded in mystery. The first five books of the Old Testament have often been labeled the “books of Moses” in a traditional belief that he authored them. But as modern biblical scholarship has clearly shown, these beginning five documents have had many hands at work on them over a lengthy period of time. The final shape of Exodus along with the other four documents, as we know them, most likely took place at the close of the OT era. This doesn’t exclude elements that go back to Moses, but the final form of Exodus in the Hebrew text tradition is clearly the product of editors who brought the materials together from a variety of sources and developed the content of the text that we’re familiar with.



The internal history inside chapter nineteen traces the arrival in the Sinai desert near Hazerqth preparation for receiving the divine Law from God. As we've discussed before in a previous lesson, the exact route of the Exodus is not all that clear from the details provided in the biblical text. The above map traces out four possible routes, with the traditional and most likely route outlined in black and going the farthest south. Chapter nineteen begins with the Israelites arriving in the Wilderness of Sinai. Mt. Sinai is traditionally identified as Mt. Horeb in the southern most part of the peninsula, but may have been much further north in the Wilderness of Paran.

As Wright says regarding the dating of the Exodus, "Archaeological evidence from the sites of Bethel, Lachish, Debir, and probably Hazor suggests a thirteenth-century date for the Israelite conquest of Canaan and may be taken to be in accord with the information of Mer-ne-ptah's stele." Mer-ne-ptah was an Egyptian pharaoh who first mentioned the Israelites in an inscription that has been discovered. Thus, if these assessments are on target, our text is dealing with the experience of the Israelites in the 1200s in the desert in Sinai -- a location from the above picture that doesn't invite or attract because of its barrenness. (For an interesting animated audio-video depiction designed for children see <http://www.k4t.com/chosen/mtsinai.html>.)

b. Literary

The contextual setting for chapter nineteen of Exodus is relatively easy to determine. Walter Brueggemann in the Exodus volume of the *New Interpreter's Bible* has helpfully underscored the chiasmic structure of 19:1-24:18, which stands as the heart of the entire book of Exodus, as follows:

In large design this passage [19:1-24:18] is chiasmically arranged:

- A theophany (19)
- B law (20:1-17)
- C mediator (20:18-21)
- C' mediator (vv. 22-26)
- B' law (21:1– 23:19, 20-33)
- A' theophany (24)

Brueggemann then explains the significance of chapter nineteen in this literary contextual understanding:

The juxtaposition of theophany and law roots Israel's definitional commands in nothing less than the sovereign voice and will of Yahweh. The law that constitutes Israel's existence originates outside Israel's historical horizon and beyond the reach of Moses or of any king. Israelite life is mandated from the awesome region of heaven, and Moses must enter glory to receive all that is given. The effect of this textual arrangement is to assert that Israel is neither a historical accident nor an ordinary political entity, but a peculiar community willed and destined by God. Its earthly vocation, to be a priestly kingdom mediating God's intention for the world, is grounded in a holy, heavenly purpose. That holy purpose must be practiced in the dailiness of human history.

In following this understanding, chapter nineteen corresponds to chapter twenty-four with the appearance of God in the narrative as the sovereign divine voice establishing the covenant and underscoring the obligation of the Israelites to obey the details of the covenant code that was handed down to them through

Moses. Thus three primary themes stand out: God; the Law; and Moses as mediator. Our passage then centers on the role of God.

II. Message

Again Brueggemann has a helpful summation of the literary structure of chapter nineteen:

This extensive, complicated chapter serves as an introduction to the meeting between Yahweh and Israel at "the mountain." Cast in liturgical form, its work is the preparation by Israel to be properly qualified for worship of Yahweh. Rhetorically, the central portion of the text reports a theophany—a disciplined account of the powerful, disruptive, cataclysmic coming of God into the midst of the community. The chapter begins with a geographical note (vv. 1-2), followed by a speech of God to Moses (vv. 3-6). The remainder of the chapter is constituted by a series of transactions that make the meeting possible (vv. 7-25).

We will follow this understanding in our study of the scripture text.

a. Arrival at Sinai, vv. 1-2

NASB

1 In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. 2 When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain.

NRSV

1 On 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](#). 2 They had journeyed from [Rephidim](#), entered the wilderness of [Sinai](#), and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain.

NLT

1 The Israelites arrived in the wilderness of [Sinai](#) exactly two months after they left Egypt. 2 After breaking camp at [Rephidim](#), they came to the base of Mount Sinai and set up camp there.

Comments:

These first two verses set the scene for what follows with time and place indicators. The Wikipedia URL provides a helpful summation of the experiences of the Israelites at Rephidim:

[Rephidim](#) - *supports*, one of the stations of the Israelites, situated in the [Wady Feiran](#), near its junction with the Wady esh-Sheikh. Here no water could be found for the people to drink, and in their impatience they were ready to stone Moses, as if he were the cause of their distress. At the command of God Moses smote "the rock in Horeb," and a copious stream flowed forth, enough for all the people. After this the Amalekites attacked the Israelites while they were here encamped, but they were utterly defeated (Ex. 17:1, 8-16). They were the "first of the nations" to make war against Israel (Num. 24:20).

Leaving Rephidim, the Israelites advanced into the wilderness of Sinai (Ex. 19:1, 2; Num. 33:14, 15), marching probably through the two passes of the Wady Solaf and the Wady esh-Sheikh, which converge at the entrance to the plain er-Rahah, the "desert of Sinai," which is two miles long and about half a mile broad. (See [Sinai](#); [Meribah](#).)

At Rephidim, the Israelites experienced trouble both internally and externally. The lack of adequate water led to their complaining against Moses and his leadership ([Ex. 17:1-7](#)). Then, they were attacked by the [Amalekites](#), but under Joshua's military leadership the Israelites successfully defended themselves ([Ex. 17:8-16](#)). They arrived at [Sinai](#) a little over two months after leaving Egypt according to the text, but during that two months they had experienced many ups and downs that helped to shape them into a more cohesive group of people. In many ways, these experiences helped prepare them for the experience at Sinai, although they were far from fully ready to receive God's Law and consistently commit themselves to obey it.

One important lesson implied from these verses relates to coping with the ups and downs of life on a regular basis. Although fully understandable from a purely human perspective, the Israelites' fuss-



ing about Moses' leadership was an early sign of serious problems for this group of people. This, in large part, because of their lack of trust both in Moses and in God. The immediate challenge of finding water for such a large group of people seemed overwhelming, but even with their miraculous deliverance from the Egyptians still fresh on their minds, the people could not comprehend how God would solve this water issue. Then the attack from the Amalekites provided another challenge from the outside. In both instances, the scriptural accounts in [Exodus 17](#) highlight the leadership of Moses and his following God's directives. When a church enters times of struggle, the temptation to complain about leaders rises in proportion to the intensity of the struggle, in most instances. But when the spiritual leaders of the church are in tune with the Lord as Moses was, the congregation needs to trust both God and their leaders.

b. Moses' Encounter with God, vv. 3-6

NASB

3 Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: 4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and *how* I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. 5 'Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; 6 and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel."

NRSV

3 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: 4 You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 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, 6 but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

NLT

3 Then Moses climbed the mountain to appear before God. The LORD called out to him from the mountain and said, "Give these instructions to the descendants of Jacob, the people of Israel: 4 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. You know how I brought you to myself and carried you on eagle's wings. 5 Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the nations of the earth; for all the earth belongs to me. 6 And you will be to me a kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' Give this message to the Israelites."

Comments:

These verses highlight Moses' initial encounter with God on [Mt. Sinai](#) where basic instructions were provided for the people. Prof. Brueggemann in the *New Interpreter's Bible* has a helpful summation of these verses:

19:3-6 God speaks to Moses, abruptly and with sovereign power. This speech is likely the most programmatic for Israelite faith that we have in the entire tradition of Moses. It divides into two parts.

First, v. 4 is an indicative statement recalling the entire narrative of liberation. It affirms that Egypt is now past tense to Israel and that unambiguously the initiative of God has changed Israel's destiny. This verse fully and completely summarizes the memory of the exodus, which is the ground of all that follows. Israel has witnessed God's decisive combat against and triumph over Egypt. Moreover, Yahweh, with enormous power, has taken Israel up, out of Egypt and bondage. Remarkably, the "flight out of Egypt" has not had as its destination the mountain, the land, or any other place, but "to me." That is, the goal of the exodus is presented as a flight from Pharaoh to Yahweh, from one master to a new one.

The metaphor of an eagle for Yahweh's rescue of Israel from bondage is compelling. According to Deut 32:11-14, the eagle (Yahweh) is a nurturing, protective agent who carries, guides, feeds, and protects (cf. Exod 15:4-10, 13-17). The predominant note concerning the eagle here, however, is one of majestic, devastating power (cf. Deut 28:49; Jer 48:40; 49:27). Thus the image holds together majestic power and protective nurturing. The exodus required both power to override the grip of Egypt and nurturing to sustain when there was no other sustenance. Later on, the same image is used in Isa 40:31 very differently, for now Israel itself is like a powerful eagle that does not grow weary or faint (cf. Ps 103:5). That eagle, however, derives its strength from attentiveness to Yahweh, the one who creates and authorizes soaring eagles (cf. Job 39:27).

This extraordinary memory (v. 4) now turns to anticipation of life in devotion to Yahweh (vv. 5-6). Two facts of this anticipation interest us. First, the future of Israel is governed by an "if" and by a powerful infinitive absolute;

Israel's future is conditional. Everything depends on Israel's readiness to listen ([mv sm (; cf. 15:26) and to keep covenant. This strong conditional surprises us after the indicative of v. 4. It is as though the generous God of exodus has abruptly become the demanding God of Sinai; and so it is. While Yahweh's initial rescue is unconditional and without reservation, a sustained relation with Yahweh is one of rigorous demand for covenant. Indeed, the long Sinai text that follows is a statement of condition whereby this rescued people can be a community of ongoing covenant.

The *second element* of the statement is a promise of Israel's special status. On the one hand, Israel (assuming the conditions are met) is Yahweh's especially prized, peculiar possession. One can see in this verse the faith of Israel, struggling with the tension between universal claim ("all the earth is mine") and the special election of Israel. Indeed, these verses may indicate that Yahweh's own life is a struggle over this tension. Yahweh is indeed the creator who possesses and governs all creation, all peoples. Yahweh also, however, has a special, intimate relation with Israel.

On the other hand, Israel (assuming the conditions are met) is to occupy a position in the world that partakes both of sacral significance and political authority. The two nouns used are specifically political references, kingdom and nation. Their modifiers, however, move in a sacerdotal direction, priestly and holy. Israel is to be a community in which worldly power and holy purpose converge.⁹⁵ Israel thus has an unparalleled vocation, and Sinai is the meeting whereby that vocation is to be given and accepted.

Verses 5-6 are extraordinary, because they manage in a single utterance to voice both an unthinkable purpose that foresees a people the like of which has never existed, and an unaccommodating condition affirming that Israel's peculiar status is endlessly derivative and never possessed. Israel's holy distinctiveness depends on moment-by-moment listening to the God who commands and authorizes. Whenever Israel ceases to listen and to keep covenant, and presumes upon its "status," it forfeits its claim in that moment.

These three verses, as James Muilenburg has shown, provide the primary themes and the elemental structure for "Mosaic faith."⁹⁶ In the long, sacerdotal section beginning in Exodus 25, this link between promise and demand is not forgotten. Israel is to be holy and priestly; obedience to commands is pivotal even in the sacerdotal tradition, which takes such a high view of Israel (cf. 25:16, 22).

Moses' meeting with God described here laid out the heart of the Israelites' unique relationship to God. These people were to be God's vehicle of mediation between the sovereign God of the universe and all peoples in His creation. They were miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt for this purpose and sustained in the barren desert to meet God at the mountain in order to receive consecration and preparation for this divine mission. The text clearly specifies a theocratic governmental structure for the Israelites, since they are to be "a priestly kingdom." But this special status is forever contingent upon their obedience to the specifications of the covenant agreement between God and Israel. The dominating trait that is to mark them as different is holiness.

The significance of this passage to us today is considerable. The language of [priests](#) and [holiness](#) is taken over by Jesus and Paul along with the other apostles with application to the community of faith called Christians. (For a listing see the use of ἀγιάζω ([to make holy](#)) and ἱερεύς ([priest](#)) in the NT.)

This raises a question being debated increasingly among Christians today: Does Israel continue to enjoy this special relationship with God? Or, did they forfeit it through disobedience and thus Christianity has taken Israel's place as the covenant community? For some Christians including a few conservative evangelicals, the conviction is that Israel continues to enjoy this covenant relationship. In effect, the conclusion is reached that now two covenants are in place: one with Israel and another with Christians. The implication of this thinking is that two ways of salvation exist: one for Jews, and another for non-Jews. Surprisingly many conservative Christians are beginning to embrace this heresy, including some Baptists. The language of Paul in [Romans 9-11](#) and Peter in [1 Peter 2:1-10](#) are quite explicit: God set up one way of salvation for all humanity and that is exclusively through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus meant what he said clearly in [John 14:6](#) (NRSV): "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." That Israel failed in its divinely appointed mission is made clear by Jesus in the so-called [Little Apocalypse](#) sections of the Synoptic Gospels of Matt. 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. But in our day in the name of ecumenical concerns, some are overlooking or just ignoring these basic teachings of scripture. To be sure, the history of Christian treatment of the Jewish people from the third century A.D. onward is not good, but this does not justify ignoring a basic teaching of the Bible.

The real issue becomes the covenant relationship that we as Christians enjoy with Almighty God

through Jesus Christ. The insights to be gleaned from this passage in that regard underscore the reality of God's demand upon us as a channel of mediation to the rest of humanity. As the NT writers clearly understood, we are to be witnesses of God's grace and salvation to all the world. Additionally, the demand for holiness remains relevant to Christians. God's expectation upon His people, whether Israelites or Christians, is that they are to be a holy people. No exceptions, no loopholes around it. Jesus was very clear in [Matt. 5:48](#) with the climatic statement summarizing his expectation for his followers (NRSV): "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." This OT principle is reapplied to Christians without being toned down or modified.

The Israelites came to Sinai to meet God. Moses' initial meeting with God on the mountain outlined His basic expectation of them. The contours of their faith and relationship with God were set forth. It was upon this same foundation that Jesus built the principles of the new covenant many centuries later.

c. Moses Introduces God to the people, vv. 7-25

NASB

7 So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. 8 All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!"

And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD. 9 The LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever." Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD. 10 The LORD also said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; 11 and let them be ready for the third day, for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. 12 "You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. 13 'No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain."

NRSV

7 So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. 8 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. 9 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." When Moses had told the words of the people to the Lord, 10 the Lord said to Moses: "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes 11 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. 12 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. 13 No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; F42 whether animal or human being, they shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain."

14 So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He

NLT

7 Moses returned from the mountain and called together the leaders of the people and told them what the LORD had said. 8 They all responded together, "We will certainly do everything the LORD asks of us."

So Moses brought the people's answer back to the LORD. 9 Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a thick cloud so the people themselves can hear me as I speak to you. Then they will always have confidence in you." Moses told the LORD what the people had said. 10 Then the LORD told Moses, "Go down and prepare the people for my visit. Purify them today and tomorrow, and have them wash their clothing. 11 Be sure they are ready on the third day, for I will come down upon Mount Sinai as all the people watch. 12 Set boundary lines that the people may not pass. Warn them, 'Be careful! Do not go up on the mountain or even touch its boundaries. Those who do will certainly die! 13 Any people or animals that cross the boundary must be stoned to death or shot with arrows. They must not be touched by human hands.' The people must stay away from the mountain until they hear one long blast from the ram's horn. Then they must gather at the foot of the mountain."

14 So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments. 15 He said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman."

16 So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who *were* in the camp trembled. 17 And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. 19 When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. F387 20 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. 21 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down, warn the people, so that they do not break through to the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. 22 "Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, or else the LORD will break out against them." 23 Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us, saying, 'Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.' " 24 Then the LORD said to him, "Go down and come up *again*, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, or He will break forth upon them." 25 So Moses went down to the people and told them.

consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. 15 And he said to the people, "Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman."

16 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. 17 Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. 18 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. 19 As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. 20 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. 21 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. 22 Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves or the Lord will break out against them." 23 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.' " 24 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." 25 So Moses went down to the people and told them.

14 So Moses went down to the people. He purified them for worship and had them wash their clothing. 15 He told them, "Get ready for an important event two days from now. And until then, abstain from having sexual intercourse."

16 On the morning of the third day, there was a powerful thunder and lightning storm, and a dense cloud came down upon the mountain. There was a long, loud blast from a ram's horn, and all the people trembled. 17 Moses led them out from the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 All Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the LORD had descended on it in the form of fire. The smoke billowed into the sky like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain shook with a violent earthquake. 19 As the horn blast grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God thundered his reply for all to hear. 20 The LORD came down on the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses climbed the mountain. 21 Then the LORD told Moses, "Go back down and warn the people not to cross the boundaries. They must not come up here to see the LORD, for those who do will die. 22 Even the priests who regularly come near to the LORD must purify themselves, or I will destroy them." 23 "But LORD, the people cannot come up on the mountain!" Moses protested. "You already told them not to. You told me to set boundaries around the mountain and to declare it off limits." 24 But the LORD said, "Go down anyway and bring Aaron back with you. In the meantime, do not let the priests or the people cross the boundaries to come up here. If they do, I will punish them." 25 So Moses went down to the people and told them what the LORD had said.

Comments:

The focus of verses seven through twenty-five is the meeting of God with the people. Moses traveled up and down the mountain several times in setting up this meeting, since the people's encounter with Almighty God was both dangerous and required extensive preparation. This section of text, especially verses 16-25, is called a [theophany](#), that is, a direct appearance of God.

When Moses finished his initial meeting with God where the basis requirements of God were laid out, he reported these to the people, primarily through the leaders (vv. 7-9). And they pledged their obedience to God on the basis of these terms.

When he went back up the mountain to report this to God, he was told to go back and take two days to consecrate the people for a meeting with God, who would "come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people" (19:11, NRSV). Again Prof. Brueggemann has a helpful summation of vv. 9-15:

19:9-15. When Yahweh has the oath reported in Yahweh's own ears by Moses, Yahweh announces a stunning resolve: Yahweh will "come to you" (v. 9). The statement is direct and unconditional. We can see that this initial promise of presence, in the final form of the text, looks ahead to Exodus 25–31, which is preoccupied with the presence of God. Even in this direct statement, however, the intervention of Yahweh is immediately hedged about by "a dense cloud." Even God's direct presence will be shrouded in mystery and shadow. The most that is intended is that God will speak and Israel will hear. No possibility of Yahweh's being seen is offered.

The intent of Yahweh's direct speech to Israel is not to secure obedience. Yahweh's speech is offered, remarkably enough, only as a way to certify and legitimate Moses, so that Israel may "trust" Moses' words. This text thus has one eye on the authority of Moses and the enduring "office of Moses." The problem of believing Moses has been present in the narrative very early (4:1-9), but seemed resolved in 14:31. The subsequent protests against Moses (16:2-3; 17:2) suggest that because his requirements are so rigorous, issues of authority inevitably recur. This verse makes clear that Moses' radical vision is indeed Yahweh's vision.

Yahweh's resolve to "come to you" is a guarded one, protected by "a dense cloud." As Yahweh takes such precaution that Yahweh's own holiness should not be trivialized, so Israel must make adequate, careful ritual preparation for this spectacular meeting (vv. 10-15). This is not a spontaneous, intrusive, surprising confrontation, but a paced meeting that will be carefully choreographed. On the one hand, such intentionality suggests that the narrator's imagination is under the influence of regular worship, so that every meeting with God, including this one, is imagined in this form. On the other hand, this preparation is so that the initial Sinai meeting can be replicated and reenacted, much as Passover replicates exodus or as Eucharist replicates the "last supper."

The work of preparation is to become "holy"—qualified to be in the presence of the holy God (vv. 10, 14). The prescribed preparation consists primarily in ritual cleansing. (On such washing, see 30:17-21. The act of ritual washing has become essential as a dramatic enactment to separate the sphere of worship from all other spheres, to assert that this meeting is different and one must be different to be there.) One can detect here the beginning of the distinctions of "clean and unclean" and "holy and profane," which will come to dominate later sacerdotal thought in Israel (cf. Lev 10:10; Ezek 22:26). One cannot approach this meeting carelessly, as though it were continuous with the rest of one's life.

Around the central preparation of washing, we may observe three other facets on "sanctification." First, the reference to "the third day" likely means as soon as all things are ready and is not to be taken as an exact number. The reference to the third day is perhaps taken up by Hos 6:2, which in turn is influential in the gospel narrative concerning the resurrection of Jesus on the third day. Indeed, "the meeting" of Easter is not unlike a replication of the meeting of Sinai, whereby life begins anew.

Second, the dire warning culminating in "shall surely die" (תָּמוּתְךָ יָמוּת, v. 12) underscores the danger of the meeting and the otherness of God's holiness. Not only is God's "person" dangerous but even the mountain as God's habitat constitutes a great risk for Israel as well. Contact with Yahweh's holiness can be pursued only under intense discipline.

Third, in addition to the general notion of cleanness, the final line of v. 15 gives a powerful masculine tilt to the narrative, for contact with a woman will either profane, weaken, or render them impure. While we can only abhor the sexist reference in this text, which treats women as troublesome and men as "proper worshipers," even this rigorous tradition notices the odd and freighted connection between religion and sexuality; a connection that still operates powerfully among us. That inescapable connection is worth notice here, even though we might propose a very different adjudication of the issue.

Just as promised, on the third day God made His appearance with the mountain wrapped in smoke and fire (vv. 16-25). When God descended to the top of the mountain, Moses was summoned to go up to

meet Him and then told to make certain the people didn't step out of the boundaries to come up the mountain, or else they would face death. All of this text is preparatory to the following chapters in Exodus where the divine Law (the Torah) is delivered to Moses.

Once more Prof. Brueggemann's comments are helpful:

This raw, pre-rational mode of discourse is crucial for what is uttered in Scripture. First, the pivot points of the Bible are narratives of theophany that witness to the utter holiness of God. Note, for example, the great prophetic encounters with God (Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekiel), the pivot points in the life of Jesus (birth, baptism, transfiguration, crucifixion, and resurrection), and the break points in the life of the church (Pentecost, apocalyptic vision). Our reading of the Bible is often poverty-stricken, either because we exclude these texts as beyond our "realism," or because we trivialize their discourse with our banal exposition. These texts propose that our lives should also be structured by these pre-rational, dangerous comings of God, which lie beyond our capacity for explanation and control.

Second, theophany belongs to a faith-ordered human life. Our lives are not to be lived on a flat plane of bourgeois control. We are visited by the holy in both disruptive and healing ways. What Abraham Maslow too easily calls "peak experiences" are indeed definitional for human life. Persons flattened by modernity require a daring mode of discourse and a more venturesome field of images, whereby intrusions of the holy can be accepted as belonging to our human life. Theophanic texts provide access to experiences in the ongoing life of God to which we have no access without such speech. Israel's sense of humanness does not arise simply from political liberation but from this theophanic incursion that reorders its life.

In the end, however, theophanic discourse primarily serves neither a liturgic agenda nor notions of human personhood. Theophanic discourse is required in order to speak adequately about the character of this holy God who intrudes dangerously and disruptively in order to transform. This God lives neither in easy intimacy with us nor in remote sovereignty over us, but in odd ways comes and goes, seizing initiative and redefining reality.

In this dramatic narrative, Yahweh seizes initiative to establish the relation. This text concerns the freedom of God utterly untamed and undomesticated. In the face of all of Israel's preparations, God is loosed in a sovereignty that evokes trembling. There is something here of Barth's "otherness," an other who is decisively present and who insists that all else must be ordered and reoriented around this coming.

This text seems odd in the bourgeois context of Western Christianity. It witnesses to an extraordinary mountain, an extraordinary God, and an extraordinary people. It invites a reconsideration of our profanation of life whereby we manage and control and leave for religion only innocuous fringes. It models an endangered community that is willing to entertain holiness at its center. The narrative is so dramatic that we may miss its uncommon affirmation. In v. 27, the people "meet God." In vv. 18 and 20, God "comes down." This is an entry of heaven into earth, and earth is never again the same. This is an entry of holiness into Israel, and Israel is never again the same. The unloosing (breaking out) of holiness is so odd for us; the only thing odder is that in chapter 20 this holiness is fully mobilized around succinct and measured demand. The God of Sinai is a revolutionary sovereign who invites this prepared people to come under the discipline of the revolution (cf. Luke 1:17).

The lingering questions posed by this text are how do we meet God? What preparations do we make? How deep is our reverence for Him? How much is our life changed by that meeting? Ancient Israel had to prepare themselves thoroughly for this meeting. Do we? The meeting laid the foundation for the giving of a momentous revelation of God to them. Yet, subsequent history reflects their ongoing struggle to live up to God's demands. They were changed, but not changed.

In Christ, we as Christians are changed by the power of God through His Spirit taking up residence in our life. Then, we are to live out that change by meeting the demands of holiness and righteousness day by day. The abiding presence of God through His Spirit provides the needed spiritual resources to achieve the level of obedience, that ancient Israel failed to meet.

God help us to live out His demands!