

Exodus 19:1-9

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Chapter 19 begins a new section of the book. The LORD has delivered His people Israel from Egypt, and it was time to enter into a covenant with them. Having reached the wilderness next to Mount Sinai, Moses made his way up the mountain to meet the LORD. The LORD spoke to him about the covenant that was about to be made between the LORD and the people of Israel. He told Moses to tell the people to remember His work of deliverance and that as a result they are His people and are to become a kingdom of priests to the nations by following God's commands. Moses relayed the message to the tribal leaders who then relayed it to the people. The people responded that they would obey the LORD in all things. Thus the agreement was proposed and agreed to. Moses then relayed this message to the LORD, who in turn gave Moses the role of intermediary between Him and the people, and Moses relayed His words to Israel.

The first two verses of chapter 19 seem to be a formal description of the Israelites' arrival at Mount Sinai. It has already been mentioned that they were at Mount Sinai in 18:5 because that is where Jethro went to visit Moses. Here, it is stated that the Israelites arrived at the mountain *in the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt*. Not only that, they got there *on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai*. That is, they arrived at Mount Sinai three months to the day that they departed Egypt. They had come *from Rephidim*, where the events of chapter 17 occurred, the provision of water ([Exodus 17:1–7](#)) and the defeat of the Amalekites ([Exodus 17:8–16](#)). It was after these events that *they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain*.

There has been a lot of discussion (and disagreement) concerning the exact location of Mount Sinai. The traditional site has been identified with *Jebel Musa* (Arabic for "mountain of Moses"). It is located in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula. Another possibility is a volcano on the northwestern side of what is now Saudi Arabia. Some scholars prefer this location because it was in the land of Midian (to where Moses fled in [Exodus 3:1](#)) and it would occasionally produce smoke and other natural phenomena, similar to the events described in [Exodus 19:18](#). Also, Paul states in [Galatians 4:25](#) that Mount Sinai is in Arabia. A few scholars have suggested other locations such

as Edom (south of the Dead Sea) and in the Negev. In any case, the exact location of Mount Sinai remains uncertain.

Verses 3-6 are a monumental moment of the Pentateuch (Genesis—Deuteronomy). It is where the Mosaic Covenant is established between the LORD and Israel. This paragraph is important because it provides a summary of the Sinai or Mosaic covenant upon which God's relationship with Israel was based. In this paragraph, the preamble—the two parties involved in the covenant—are identified in v. 4a as *You* (for Israel) and *I* (for the LORD). Thus, the LORD is the Suzerain or Ruler, and Israel is the vassal, or subject. The prologue is also identified in v. 4a, which states: *You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself.* This historical prologue recounts the past relationship of the parties. God, the Suzerain, had redeemed Israel out of slavery miraculously. They were “air lifted” out of Egypt.

The stipulations to the agreement are then outlined in verses 5-6, *Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant.* This is followed by a positive sanction, *then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.* The consequence of obedience, that Israel becomes a *kingdom of priests and a holy nation* is dependent upon Israel keeping their end of the deal: *keep My covenant.* Israel will only serve their function of demonstrating to surrounding nations the benefits of being self-governing if they actually behave in a self-governing manner.

With the Israelites camped at the base of Mount Sinai, *Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying.* It is interesting that both “God” (Heb. “Elohim”) and “the LORD” (Heb. “Yahweh”) are used in v. 3. Elohim is the generic word for God. “Elohim” is the Creator ([Genesis 1:1](#) and throughout [Genesis 1](#)) and “Yahweh” is the covenant name for God. Moses climbed the mountain to meet God, and it was the LORD (“Yahweh”) who spoke. This shows that the God of Israel is both their sovereign Creator and the One with Whom they are about to be in a covenant agreement.

God called to Moses from the mountain and *Moses* answered the call and *went up to God.* At this point *Moses* obeys God's invitation, and ascends the mountain alone, to speak with God one on one.

In vv. 4–6, the LORD does all the talking, because He is the initiator or the giver of the covenant. He tells Moses to *say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel. Jacob* was renamed *Israel*, so *Israel* and *Jacob* are the same

person. This repetition is a Hebraic way to indicate an emphasis that this covenant was exclusively between the LORD and the descendants of *Jacob*, the Israelites. Moses is the intermediary between God and the people. The covenant was not based on an abstract concept that was dreamed up. To the contrary, The LORD reminded the Israelites of three things:

- First, they *have seen what I did to the Egyptians*. They witnessed the complete destruction of one of the most powerful armies in the world. The gods of Egypt were no match for His sovereign power. Israel knows first hand of God's power as well as His benevolence toward them as a people. Also implied is that God honored His promise to Abraham in [Genesis 15:13-14](#), to bring his descendants out of slavery after 400 years of affliction.
- Second, they experienced *how I bore you on eagles' wings*. The picture of *eagles' wings* is used throughout Scripture to depict the works of the LORD. This image is used for protection ([Deuteronomy 32:11](#)) and power ([Isaiah 40:31](#)). Here, it is used to convey the idea that the LORD protected His people and extracted them from a place with no apparent means of escape. The picture of bearing Israel on *eagle's wings* is a picture of being airlifted out of an impregnable fortress; a means of escape not available without God's intervention. Not only did the LORD deliver Israel from Egypt, He provided water and food in the wilderness. He also protected them from their enemies, the Amalekites. Thus, the LORD was not only their Deliverer, He was also their Provider and Protector.
- Third, the LORD *brought you to Myself*. Having delivered, provided, and protected Israel, the LORD then guided them to His mountain for the purpose of establishing a covenant that would formalize an ongoing fellowship between God and His people. The phrase *brought you to Myself* is similar to that used of a bridegroom bringing his bride into the chamber. It is a vivid picture of the covenant relationship that was being created by the LORD and His people Israel. God often uses a picture of marriage to describe His relationship with Israel ([Ezekiel 16:8](#); [Hosea 1:2](#); [Isaiah 54:5](#)). This is consistent with God's unconditional love toward Israel and choosing them to be His own possession, irrespective of their behavior ([Deuteronomy 7:6-8](#)). This Mosaic covenant gives His chosen people a clear path to gain blessing and fellowship through obedience.

There were two phrases in the fundamental condition of obedience involved in this covenant. First, the LORD said *now then, if you will indeed obey My*

voice. The words *indeed obey* imply intense effort in the Hebrew text. One could translate this “make every effort to obey.” The LORD primarily desires effort and intent to obey God’s *voice*. This is an objective statement that God wanted to be listened to and obeyed. His *voice* spoke in a manner that could be understood. Further, results are the Lord’s, He takes care of outcomes. What He desires from His people is a vigorous effort to *obey His voice*.

Second, they were to *keep My covenant*. The specific aspect of God’s *voice* that He expected to be obeyed was set forth in the requirements in the *covenant*, or agreement, between He and His people. The covenant would consist of commandments and other laws (chapters 20–23) that were to be applied to daily life in the covenant community.

Most of the practical blessing will be direct consequences of following the laws God included in His *covenant*. For example, a community where people tell one another the truth, care for one another’s property and person, and do not envy, will be a community with thriving commerce and prosperity. People will not have to expend resources protecting themselves. Similarly, no one will be trying to extract from others. Rather, all will orient their energies to producing mutual benefit. Any community with these characteristics will prosper greatly. God’s clear desire is for Israel to demonstrate the superiority of living in a self-governing manner, and spread it to the rest of humanity.

Chapters 20-23 are just the beginning of the Sinai covenantal laws since these laws run from [Exodus 20](#) to [Leviticus 27](#). The book of Exodus begins the Mosaic covenant but does not complete it. Even the laws in the book of Numbers are properly seen as a continuity or an extension of the Mosaic covenant. However, the Ten Commandments will provide a summary format within which the detailed laws reside.

One result of their obedience will be that the Lord says they *shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine*. The word for *possession* has a root meaning from the word (Heb. “segulla”) which means “personal property.” It appears only eight times in the Old Testament. It is used for material wealth ([Eccl. 2:8](#); [I Chron. 29:3](#)), but it is more often used to describe the LORD’s special relationship with His chosen people ([Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:2, 26:18](#); [Psalms 135:4](#); [Malachi 3:17](#)). In the New Testament, this concept is applied to the Church in [I Pet. 2:9](#) and [Titus 2:14](#), where Christians are called God’s “possession.”

This raises a question, since God has previously declared Israel as His *own possession* apart from Israel's obedience. In Deuteronomy, Moses speaks of this when he recounts as follows:

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” ([Deuteronomy 7:6-8](#))

Also:

“Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people” ([Deuteronomy 9:6](#)).

Israel was chosen by God as a *possession* because of His love, and because of His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He gave the land as a possession to Israel to fulfill the grant of the land He gave to Abraham as a reward for his faithfulness ([Genesis 15](#)). Israel is a *treasured possession* irrespective of whether they obey. They continue to be loved by God even when disciplined and scattered to the wind in exile ([Jeremiah 29:11](#)). However, the reason Israel was exiled was because they were not faithful to obey God's law ([1 Chronicles 9:1](#)). God removed them *from among all the peoples* as a nation, because they were not fulfilling their assignment to act as priests, demonstrating the superior means of living in self-governing communities.

God here adds another qualifier to the phrase “*My own possession,*” namely “*among all the nations.*” Israel's position as *My possession* is unconditional. Israel's position as a priestly nation *among all the nations* depends upon their obedience. God also states *for all the earth is mine*. God is the actual owner of the earth. And as its steward, He desires the inhabitants to live in prosperity, benefitting one another, enjoying relational harmony. God intended for Israel to demonstrate to *all the nations* the best and proper manner to live, such that human flourishing is maximized. In this manner Israel would be a *kingdom of priests and a holy nation*. They were to demonstrate God's superior way of living, and be a testimony to spread this benefit to *all the earth*, for God is the owner of the earth, and desires it to be stewarded well.

The phrase “*kingdom of priests*” meant that the entire nation of the Israelites were to be priests. They would also serve as examples and a testimony to other nations. They were to demonstrate the superiority of living in self-governance. The blessings were to be so obvious that other nations would realize their need, and seek God and His ways through their testimony. God appointed no king over Israel. He was their King; He reigned over them ([1 Samuel 8:7](#)). Israel was to obey God’s commands and love their neighbor as unto the LORD.

As a result of their covenant obedience, they would be *a holy nation*. To be “holy” is to be separated for a special purpose. The Israelites were set aside to serve their God by being examples of effective living to the world around them. They were to be separated from the influences of the surrounding cultures, especially avoiding things associated with paganism. Paganism is self-serving, and focuses on fulfilling appetites. Idol worship excuses self-seeking behaviors. God’s covenant will focus on respecting and serving others, and building a self-governing community.

[Leviticus 18](#) contains a shocking list of corrupt behaviors held in common in both Egyptian as well as Canaanite cultures. This list includes an unimaginable array of incest, all manner of sexual immorality (including sexual intercourse with animals) and the revolting practice of child sacrifice. Exploitation of children and women was normalized behavior in paganism. Israel was to live apart from paganism, and live in a self-governing manner of service to others, providing protection of the innocent and vulnerable as an expression of devotion to the one and only LORD. Women were to be respected, and children trained in loving care ([Deuteronomy 6:7](#)). Their testimony was to exude from their constructive living and its results of flourishing and thriving.

The LORD reminded Moses that *these are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel*. Israel was the only nation to enter into a covenant with the LORD. In the New Testament, a New Covenant is made between the LORD and those who have believed in Jesus for everlasting life from all the peoples of the world. This New Covenant is written on hearts rather than on stone, and based on the blood of Jesus rather than the blood of sheep ([Jeremiah 31:31](#); [Matthew 26:28](#)).

Having set forth the conditions of the covenant in vv. 4-6, *Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the Lord had commanded him*. They needed to be informed about what the LORD was proposing in the covenant and then decide whether to accept it or not.

Verse 8 contains the response of the people. They *(all the people) answered together and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!"* So then, Moses goes back to *the LORD* and tells Him the response of *the people*. The Israelites agreed to the terms of the covenant and were now in a special relationship with their LORD. Their response seems genuine and enthusiastic. Sadly, however, the Old Testament is filled with examples where the people did not do (and did not want to do) what the LORD wanted them to do. The Sinai covenant made provisions for such a behavior. It spells out blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience to God's covenantal precepts. Thus, when the Israelites obey, they receive blessings from their Suzerain God. But when they disobey, they are judged by God, because they violate the terms of the covenant.

The purpose of verse 9 seems to be a confirmation of Moses as the mediator of the covenant. To do so, *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."* The word *I* is emphatic, implying that the LORD ("I Myself") would come to Moses. The word *you* is singular, referring to Moses only. This was the pattern laid down by the LORD—Moses was to be His mediator between Him and His covenant people. *Then Moses served his assigned role as mediator, and told the words of the people to the Lord.*

The LORD chose Abraham out of a pagan nation and promised to bless him immensely. God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants with land and people ([Genesis 12:7](#)) and these gifts were irrevocable ([Romans 11:29](#)), making the people of Israel God's people and granting them title to the land of Canaan. However, it was Israel's responsibility to obey the giver of the land in order to enjoy the benefits of the land and to live long in it. Therefore, the Suzerain God clearly explained the covenant stipulations to Moses so that he could relay them to the vassals (Israel). This would ensure that God is righteous and just when He judges His covenant violators.

Biblical Text:

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. ³Moses 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.”

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.