

Exodus 19-20

A Bird's Eye Overview of the Passage

The cool air of the mountains buffeted up.

Its winds pocketed and lifted.

She seeming floated on the updraft, ever lifting upward.

Majestic in every way.

There was none to match her in beauty and grandeur.

But today was special.

For today she bore her chick nestled in the feathers at her back.

It was a great day for it.

And there above the crags of Mount Sinai she climbed higher and higher.

The plains of Sinai shimmered beneath her in the hot middle eastern sun.

And then she reached her goal.

A suitable height had been arrived at.

Now was the time.

And so she twisted in the air.

Her chick dropped.

Down it plummeted.

Bewildered.

Wildly scrambling and flapping without success.

To panicked to fly.

Down.

Down.

Down it sank.

Rocketting to the ground.

But then another large eagle appeared from nowhere.

It swooped beneath the chick.

With the chick nestled on its back they began their slow climb to the crags above.

And not so far away a voice echoed to a solitary man.

Orders were given to speak to his people these words:

'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Three months have now passed to a day since the bedraggled but triumphant group of Israelites marched out of Egypt.

What was thereafter to be known as 'the way out', the Exodus, had happened.

And now whinging, they sat in the Desert of Sinai.

Under the same mountain crags where eagles teach their young to fly.

Many years had passed since God had uttered to Moses a name by which he was to be known – 'I am who I will be'.

And this God had proved who he would be.

He had delivered.

He had redeemed his people from slavery.

He had acted powerfully in history to save.

This was the God who had created the world.

The God who continually repeated that creative act by redeeming his people.

This was Yahweh of the burning bush.

And it was this Yahweh who Moses stood before yet again.

The dialogue is recorded for us in Exodus 19:3ff.

Moses is to bear a message to Israel again.

And he is to them why God had chosen them and what he has chosen them for.

He is to explain that God is about to set up a contractual relationship between himself and them.

Of how he is to enter into a covenant with them.

A covenant based on an already established relationship.

For was it not he who called Abraham.

Was it not he who remembered his people.

Was it not he who continuously cared for them.

Who watched over them like an eagle watching over its fledglings.

Was it not he who had brought them to his dwelling.

And if Israel will obey God's will by being faithful to this covenant, then a special relationship will exist.

They will be a special possession to God, distinct from all other peoples of the world.

A kingdom of priests.

A holy nation.

God's own people.

Set apart from the rest of the nations.

Dedicated to God and acting among the nations as priests function within society.

From now on this responsibility will characterise her whole existence.

And so it is that Moses takes this message to God's people.

God has offered his covenant.

And they rush to accept.

Even without knowing exactly what is expected the people accept with enthusiasm.

‘We will do all that the Lord has said.’

And God in turn responds.

He tells them he will come in person to meet with them.

But first they must be prepared.

And after the third day, God will arrive.

The directions God gives indicate that what is about to happen is fundamentally different from any ordinary event of human life.

And the Israelites follow directions.

They prepare.

And then the third day arrives.

The thunder arrives with it.

Lightening flashes across the sky.

Thick cloud descends.

Trumpets sound.

And Moses trembles as he leads the people out.

And together they stand at the front of the mountain.

And then the mountain itself begins to shake violently.

Smoke and fire appear.

The trumpets grow louder and louder.

And at their greatest intensity Moses talks to God.

And the incredible happens – God speaks back.

His voice is heard by all the people.

It thunders and echoes through the mountain crags.

Another warning comes lest the people are destroyed by God’s holiness.

Moses argues with God.

God overrules.

He insists on a further warning.

Not even priests are to be allowed to approach.

Only Aaron.

The preparation concluded, God speaks again.

He delivers ten words, ten commands, to his people.

He has taken the initiative with his people.

He has delivered and rescued them.

He is their creator and redeemer.

And now he invites them to consummate their relationship in covenant.

And their acceptance of the covenant will be reflected in their adherence to the ten words.

These ten words will be the content of their obedience.

In the clouds they experienced God's nature.

In the ten words, they experience God's will.

Exodus 19:3-5

'Though the whole world is mine' (cf. Genesis 1 & 12:1-3)

I have given a brief overview of Exodus 19 and 20.

Now I want to go back and look at a few special verses at the beginning of the chapter.

You see, I think these verses are crucial verses in understanding God's purposes in the world and his purpose for his people.

First, I want to notice the words in verse 5: 'Although the whole earth is mine...'

The phrase itself echoes Genesis 1.

For in Genesis 1 God creates the world.

He is its maker and it belongs to him.

It owes him its dependence and allegiance.

However, the subsequent chapters of Genesis demonstrate that the people of God's world did not like dependence.

They struck out at being their own masters of their own destinies.

And their striking out meant that humans were alienated from God.

And the rest of the Bible tells us of God's plan to bring them back.

But the way he chooses is to select one nation from whom a saviour will come.

One, chosen, elect, holy, nation.

This is God's means.

But his goal remains the whole world.

This is what verse 5 means – the whole world is God's, but he has set aside a special nation to bring them back to himself.

This nation are to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Now, I need to explain the concept of priesthood a bit if we are to understand the implications of this verse.

The role of a priest

Active

You see, in any society, I think a priest has a twofold function.

His first function is active.

It is to be a mediator.

That is, it is to stand between God and humans and communicate God's will.

This is what Israel are to do.

They are to perform the function of priests.

That is, they are to stand between God and world and communicate God's word to the world.

They are to speak the words of God to the world.

Passive

The second function of a priest is much more passive in relation to the world.

You see, in any society, priests are also expected to be separate from their surrounding environment.

They are called to represent God in the way that they live.

They are called to be pure in their dealings with the surrounding world.

To be separated from it.

To be holy.

The role of Israel

This is what Israel is to be.

They are to perform both priestly functions.

They are to speak the words of God to the world.

But they are also to maintain their difference and distance from the world.

They are to be holy.

They are to live godly lives.

And they do this by living the sort of lives outlined in the ten commandments.

Can you see what I'm saying?

I think that the terms 'kingdom of priests' and 'holy nation' are virtually equivalent.

They are saying that Israel's function is to communicate God to the world, and to be different to the world by being obedient to God.

A wander through history

Hosea 2

With this in mind, I want to take a wander through history to the book of Hosea, chapter 2.

Many centuries have passed.

And another man is reflecting upon this experience of Israel in the wilderness and at Mount Sinai.

This man is the prophet Hosea.

He is a strange man with some strange experiences.

For this man was called upon by God to marry a prostitute.

He was called to have children by the woman.

And his whole live became a parable.

The prostitute and her children represented the nation of Israel that had not been obedient to the ten commandments.

And in chapter 2, God tells the nation of Israel to speak to her prostitute mother.

He tells them to remind her of her disobedience to the covenant she had entered into.

The charges against Israel are recorded in Hosea 2:2-13.

The nation of Israel has been unfaithful.

They have been like an adulterous woman.

Despite God's great love for them, they have wandered off after other gods.

But then, in verse 14, the tone mood of the passage changes.

God remembers Sinai.

And he speaks of a new creation.

A new wilderness.

A new Exodus.

And a new people of God.

[Read verses 14-23]

This is God's purpose.

A new Israel who will do what the first Israel failed to do.

1 Peter 2:4-12

Now, with this passage in mind, I want you to move through history with me again.

This time we come to the book of 1 Peter where Peter is writing to a group of Christians scattered throughout the first century Roman world.

And he uses the passage from Exodus and the passage from Hosea to speak to them.

Take a look at it in 1 Peter 2:4-12.

In the first few verses he speaks of people's response to Jesus.

Of a new people of God.

Of a new holy nation.

Of a new priestly kingdom.

Of God's new chosen ones.

[Read 1 Peter 2:4-12]

Us

Now these verses are not just intended for a group of people in the first century.

They are also intended for us.

For we too were once not the people of God.

But now we are.

If we are believers in Jesus then we are God's chosen people.

God's holy nation.

God's royal priesthood.

And the job description is no different now than the one spelt out in Exodus 19.

It is still twofold.

One task is active in relation to the world.

It is to communicate what God wants to say to this world.

This is what verse 9 means.

Verse 9 is probably better translated this way: 'Declaring the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.'

This is our first task.

To tell the world that once we were not the people of God but now are because of Jesus.

That once we had not received mercy but now have because of Jesus.

In other words, our first task is to tell people about Jesus and what he has done.

Our first task is evangelistic.

It is to tell people about Jesus.

The other task is more passive in relation to the world.

But it still has a significant effect on the world.

Verses 11 and 12 spell it out.

We are to be holy as God is holy.

We are to recognise that we are separate from the world.

We are therefore to abstain from sinful desires which war against our souls.

We are to live godly lives among the pagans.

We are not to be like Israel.

We are to be like Israel was meant to be.

We are to have a solid goal of evangelism.

We are to have a solid goal to live godly lives.

We are to be priests to the world.

We are to be a holy nation.

With this in mind, let's do what Peter urges.

Look at 1 Peter 1:13-16.

[Read it]