

Exodus 19:3-6

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: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 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, but you shall be fore me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

A: *What is the subject of the text?*

God is the subject of the passage. He is the one invoking action, giving orders, and conversing with Moses. The *children* of Israel will be given the opportunity to truly become the *people* of Israel – more than mere descendants, now inheritors of the promise.

B: *What is said about the subject?*

Via the proxy of his prophet Moses, God is calling the children of Israel to remember their deliverance from Egypt. He reminds them of the manner by which he has cared for them – as protective parental eagles teaching fledglings to fly, guided by their wings.

C: *What is the purpose of what is said?*

The purpose of God giving Moses these instructions is for him to pass along the message to the children of Israel. In so doing, Israel is to step into the role which God has prepared for them as a fulfillment of the promise he made to the patriarchs – to be a holy nation.

The two verses immediately preceding this passage, 19:1-2, tell of the children of Israel arriving in the wilderness of Sinai. They had journeyed from Rephidim and had now arrived at the countryside overlooked by the holy mountain. This sets the stage for a new chapter in the story of God’s chosen people. Moses approaches God, and God calls out to Moses, about to give him a historic message for him to convey to the Hebrews.

It is interesting that God says in 19:3 לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב – “the house of Jacob” and then immediately reiterates לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל – “the sons of Israel” to describe them as well.

It is as if there is an allusion being made to past events, a throw-back to an earlier portion of Jacob's life, in which he was less than a model citizen (having defrauded both Esau and Laban). By referring to the Hebrews in this way, God may possibly be making a point of who they *once were*. They had complained at the increase in work of making bricks without straw (Ex. 5), failing to see the big picture. Yet, by now claiming them to be sons of Israel, God is including them in his promise to Jacob, signified by a change in name and character. So too, the children of Israel have undergone a time of wrestling with God's will, enduring hardship which has permanently changed them for the better.

In verse 19:4 God points out that the Israelites themselves have witnessed with their own eyes what has transpired. The images of the plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea are no doubt still freshly seared in their collective memory. While a great deal of miraculous things had transpired, we know that God did not literally carry any of the chosen people via winged birds. The imagery brings to mind birds teaching their young how to fly, or a mother sheltering her chicks beneath mighty pinions.

The word for *eagles* here is indeed plural in the Hebrew text – נְשָׂרִים. I thought this a bit curious, considering the Israelites held a strictly monotheistic belief system. Upon further researching how eagles train their young, I learned that the female eagle typically is the one to push them from the safety of the nest, and that the male circles nearby acting as a spotter. Should anything go wrong, he flies beneath those struggling to fly, supporting their weight with his own wings. This usage, coupled with the word for God in 19:3 – אֱלֹהִים *Elohim*, seems a bit more fitting. It lends itself well to the notion of Trinitarian theology, showing that in the case of the Exodus, God was both the one who prompted Israel's exit from the increasingly tense situation in Egypt, but also the

one who was there as a comforting and mighty presence in the face of turmoil. He has been both mother and father to the chosen children, calling them now to maturity.

This calling in verse 19:5 is less of a command than the handing down of the law. Rather than a “Thou shalt [not]” it has more of an invitational tone to it, indicated by the phrase “Therefore, if...” It should be noted that the deliverance from the immediate danger of Pharaoh’s wrath (and unrelenting drudgery of living as slaves) has already been done away with. Regardless of if the Israelites actually choose to embrace their deliverer, the deliverance itself has already been secured. God has put himself in a place of vulnerability – having done all the groundwork in preparation for a relationship with his chosen ones, relying on their love and gratitude without any leverage for reciprocation.

It is clear that the tone of the conversation between God and Moses is one of immediacy. Unlike many of the verses, 19:4 and 5 are not connected with a conjunction. Rather, the word *now* comes into play **וְעַתָּה** – denoting the present time period, or shortly thereafter once Moses has had a chance to hear and reiterate the message. I found it curious that the word for *hear* appears twice in succession – **אִם-שָׁמְעוּ תִשְׁמְעוּ** as if to emphasize the importance of the action of hearing, as well as the words themselves. In so doing, they will be **וַיִּשְׁמְרוּתָם** – *preserving* the covenant that has already been set forth.

This is a strong indicator that this passage is not to be seen as the establishment of a new covenant, though it is a monumental moment in the life of Israel as a whole. Rather, it is a continuation of the promises passed down through the lineage Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – that of becoming a great people which shall in turn bless others. In so doing, they will be the apple of God’s eye, so to speak. The word **סִגְלָה** is translated as

treasured possession of a doting God, favored among the other people of the earth. While YHWH obviously has dominion over its entirety, they are to be the special inhabitants.

In 19:6, God states specifically what the function of Israel shall be, כְּהֲנִיִּם מְמַלְכֶת – a *kingdom of priests* that will comprise a holy nation. It is interesting that while there were to be specific roles of priests within the society of Israel, that the entirety of the kingdom was to be set apart and therefore priestly in relation to the surrounding nations. This wording calls to mind God’s promise in Genesis 12:2 to make from Abraham a great nation of descendants who would be a blessing to the earth.

The tone with which God is presenting the option of obedience to Israel is that of a loving father telling his children of their inheritance. It is inviting, yet serious – bidding the hearers to enter into relationship and in so doing keep the covenantal agreement of their ancestors, enabling them to reap the benefits of the promise. Though there has certainly been conditions and expectations to be met in the handing down of the law, the open door here is more like that of Joshua 24:15 – “Choose this day whom you will serve... As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

The salvific tone that has been present throughout the trials of the Exodus narrative has now reached a pivot point. No longer is the relationship defined in terms of the oppressed and their rescuer. Rather, it is becoming more intimate – an invitation to obedience by which a father can be known by his children. The adhering to the Ten Commandments (preserving the covenant) is not to be due to fear but gratitude, for what has already been done: a mighty saving act from the clutches of the Egyptians – and indeed what is yet to be done: becoming a blessing to all the nations of the earth.