

## Mount Sinai: Shock and Awe

Please read **Exodus 19: 1-25 (twice)** and 1 Peter 2: 4-12, and then pray: 'Almighty God, may your Word be our rule, your Spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

Mount Sinai also known as Mount Horeb, is quite possibly the most significant mountain in the bible and one of the most significant mountains affecting the history of humankind. Why would I describe it as the most significant mountain in Holy Scripture? Because as well as being called Sinai and Horeb, it is also referred to as **'the mountain of God.'** It was not the mountain of God because it was the dwelling place of God. Mount Zion (in Jerusalem) is often referred to as such. (Psalm 48:1f 74:2, 99:9) Sinai is the 'mountain of God' because of its specific choice by God to be **the geographical place and highpoint** of the revelation of His holy and awesome Being to his chosen people Israel!

**Sinai was the mountain of God's choice for the revelation of his awe-inspiring presence.** Mount Sinai is holy because God chose and separated it for his holy purposes. All the mountains belong to God. Every one of them. The whole earth and all its peoples belong to the Almighty Creator (Exodus 19:5). But this one mountain is 'holy' through Sovereign appointment. The 'mountain of God' is where Moses met God for the first time at the burning bush. (Exodus 3:1). It is the place where Aaron was sent to meet Moses before the exodus:

*"The Lord said to Aaron, 'Go into the desert to meet Moses.' So, he met Moses at the **mountain of God** and kissed him. Then Moses told Aaron everything the Lord had sent him to say, and about all the miraculous signs he had commanded him to perform."* (Exodus 4:27) God tells Moses that after the deliverance of his people from the Egyptians – Moses and the people will come to **this mountain** to worship God.

*And God said, 'I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God **on this mountain.**'* (Exodus 3:12)

Sinai is the **appointed place** where all the people of Israel, not just Moses, will meet the God who will liberate them and set them apart as his very own people. They will meet for worship. They will meet to hear from God. A covenant will be established. They will see God come down and witness his holy and awesome presence. They will know Moses to be God's specially chosen leader. All this will happen at Sinai. For this mountain and meeting place, is "set apart" as holy unto the Lord.

Three months after departing from Egypt, having crossed the Red Sea on dry land, the liberated people finally arrive at the place they are meant to be – Sinai. *'In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt – on the very day – they came to the desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the desert of Sinai, and Israel **camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.**'* (19:1-2)

A further significant fact is this. They would stay at the base of this mountain for an **entire year**. Much revelation and glory would be mediated down through Moses from this mountain over the coming months. Exodus 19-40 are all based here at Sinai – the giving of the ten commandments, other sacred laws, and instructions for the construction of the tabernacle. All from and in front of this mountain!

The mountain has other interesting features. The other great OT figure associated with Sinai or **Horeb** was Elijah. This austere prophet fled to Horeb from fear of the death threats from the evil Queen Jezebel after Elijah had defeated the prophets of Baal on **Mount Carmel**. (1 Kings 19:8) Friends, it is no coincidence, that the two mighty and eminent prophets of God associated with Sinai (Moses and Elijah) are the two who appear to Jesus and his 3 disciples on the glorious **Mount of Transfiguration**. (Matthew 17:3) All things are beautifully interwoven in the history of our salvation.

This mountain, like Ararat where the Ark rested, is not in Israel. Sinai is in Egypt, in the Sinai Peninsula and desert. The Ararat Mountain range is also outside Israel and is situated in eastern Turkey. Not all prominent action in the bible is within the boundaries of Israel. But nevertheless, there is a promised land which was divinely earmarked and promised by God, and Sinai was enroute to that promised land.

Moses will see that land stretched out before him from the summit of **Mount Nebo** (Deuteronomy 33:1f), but he will not be allowed to enter it. He will only see it from a distance. That is another story on another great mountain.

There are 2 things which I want to stress which are of great relevance to us which emerge from Exodus 19 – a chapter where the word “mountain” is used more than 15 times and where boundaries at the base of the mountain are to be clearly marked off. The mountain must be very significant on that score alone! Here are the 2 hugely significant things for us to note:

- The outline and introduction of God’s amazing covenant with the people of Israel.
- God’s awesome majesty, presence and power and appropriate worship.

Firstly, God’s covenant with Israel. **(Read Exodus 19: 3-8)** God was already covenanted to his people because of his promises to Abraham, Issac, and Jacob (Exodus 3:6). This nation would be used to bless all the nations upon the earth. Nevertheless, it is at this point, during this amazing period time at the base of Sinai, that the Israelites formally become ‘the people of God.’ Of all the nations on the earth, this is the one God has chosen to separate as ‘his very own’ – and use to bless all the world through the coming of his Son our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Israel has been singled out. *(I believe antisemitism ultimately stems from God’s choice of Israel)*

They did not choose to be singled out. God chose them and invited them into covenant with Himself. Israel chose to enter that covenant. They were chosen by grace, not because they were in some way special, but God wanted to choose and use one group of people to bring blessing to the entire world. Moses records this in **Deuteronomy 7: 6-8**. (Read) Nationhood begins for Israel at Sinai. They embrace the call to become the people of God. Amazingly they break the covenant by fashioning a golden-calf god before the covenant is cemented. But God’s covenant with the people goes ahead. (Exodus 34). Why is this relevant to us?

Because out of this covenant comes the people of God and from this race comes the Christ, the Messiah, and from him comes salvation to the whole world – to you and I. What is especially noteworthy is the way the apostle Peter, a citizen of Israel, reapplies the words and promises of **Exodus 19:5-6** to the Church in his letter which is sent to Gentiles as well as Jews. **Read Exodus 19:5-6, then 1 Peter 2: 9-10.**

As a result of the death and resurrection of Christ, and from the day of Pentecost, “the people of God” became a much broader and wider concept. It no longer merely applied to ethnic Israel, it is applied to all who recognised and embrace the Messiah, Jesus Christ; people who have received and rejoiced in the ‘mercy of God’ which flowed from the blood-stained cross that stood on top of Mount Calvary. It so important for you and I to realise and fully grasp, that we part of a worldwide, supra-national, multi-ethnic Church as the people of the living God! We are God’s very own people through our personal union with Jesus His Son. We are God’s treasured possession. God is our Father. We are His beloved and chosen children – now part of God’s one holy nation scattered across the entire globe.

What was true of Israel back in Exodus and throughout the OT, is now a world-wide, multi-national phenomenon. The gospel is for all nations. (Matthew 28:19) God’s grace in Jesus is offered to all who dwell in the world for which Christ died and rose again. Ethnic Israel continues to be special to God

because of its unique history and calling and covenants. The apostle Paul, a Jew called to be apostle to the Gentiles says so in **Romans 9: 2-5. (Read)** Paul goes on to write about his expectations that Israel will be saved and gathered in one day. But Paul and all the writing apostles, whether it be Peter or John taught about the changed nature of the “one nation” under God’s banner of love. Here is what the apostle John writes in Revelation 5 where he records his vision of the population of heaven;

*‘You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God **from very tribe and language and people and nation.** You made them to be a **kingdom of priests** (Exodus language again) to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth. (Revelation 5: 9-10)*

Friends, we can trace our precious spiritual roots back to Sinai. We can go further back than that. We can go back to the call of Abraham. (Genesis 12:3) *All peoples on earth will be blessed through you. As we have already sung and celebrated: ‘We are your people made for your glory and we worship you.’ ‘You have redeemed us from every nation and we worship you.’* What a privilege and joy to be part of God’s holy family and nation – to be one in Christ our universal Saviour and Lord!

Secondly, when considering the content of Exodus 19 and what Moses wished to communicate through it, you come face to face with the glory of the God who came down upon this mountain with fearsome holiness and awesome power. As well as Moses being a very great leader and prophet, he seems to have been an adept mountain climber. From Exodus 19-40, we learn that Moses ascended this auspicious mountain 7 times. In Exodus 19, he climbs Sinai 3 times.

On the first occasion Moses meets God who instructs him to tell the people about God’s faithfulness and love for them and the way He brought them to the mountain on eagle’s wings. Moses tells the people about God’s kindness and they respond by declaring that they will do everything God asks of them. They want to commit themselves to God. Moses goes up the mountain a second time to be told by God that God will come down upon the mountain and visit the people, so they must be ready for His arrival in three days. They are to get ready for God’s coming in power. Moses returns to the people and speaks to them of the need to consecrate themselves and wash their clothes. They have two days to get ready, two days to prepare; clothes must be washed; hearts and bodies prepared and consecrated; strict boundaries set around the base of the mountain. Clear demarcation lines must not be crossed.

When Moses told the people to expect God on the “third day” - how do you think they were felt? Having been told about the vital importance of personal cleansing and boundaries – how must the people have felt? Nervous? Scared? Fearful? Full of excitement? What were their expectations? Did they sense that what was about to happen would be as dramatic and dangerous as it turned out to be? Did they expect the thick, dense dark cloud? Did they anticipate the spectacular and dramatic lightning and thunder? Did they expect the dangerous fire and the smoke? Did they realise that the powerful noise from the mysterious trumpet would not only be extremely loud and penetrating, but would get much louder and continue for such a long time?

### **Read Exodus 19: 16-25**

What this unique episode teaches us is that the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob, the God of Moses and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, **our God**, is a God who is supremely awesome in majesty, power, and holiness. His holiness is resplendent and dangerous. God’s name and presence is awesome and to be hallowed. (Psalm 99:3) We are told that the people literally trembled with fear. Even Moses, who had met God before and knew the almighty power and wonder of God – trembled!

But such was the holy and glorious nature of God's coming – that the mountain itself also shook and trembled!

One of the things that is missing in much of the Church today is an solemn awareness and respect for the living God who is altogether holy and righteous. We have lost 'the fear of God' in our generation. We no longer see the need to approach God in prayer and worship with reverent and respectful fear. On numerous occasions the bible declares that the 'fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.' In Hebrews 12, the writer reminds us two sacred mountains, Sinai and Zion. After revealing the relevance of each, he concludes by teaching this to the Church; *'Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken (unlike the earth and mountains like Sinai), let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.'* (Hebrews 12: 28-29)

If there is one great and powerful lesson which I take away from Mount Sinai – it is this! Our God is awesome and holy and must be worshipped acceptably with reverence and awe. Jesus our Mediator, enables us to come close to God and to know and call God our Father, but nevertheless we must always recognise God's true majesty, dangerous power, and resplendent holiness. Sin makes God dangerous, but thanks be to Jesus who has removed our sins, and made it possible for us, through his blood to enter the Holy of holies. We can ascend the holy hill to worship, but it is all thanks to Jesus and his amazing grace and sacrifice. (Psalm 24: 3-6, John 3:16)

Moses must have been a man of enormous courage. How many of us would have dared to climb that holy mountain with the thunder, lightning, the ground beneath shaking, the fire and billowing smoke? But he went because he trusted the God who was summoning him into His divine presence. When mountains are on fire and smoking like a furnace – you would generally be fleeing for your life in the opposite direction. Moses ascended and entered the presence of His awesome God. He went up for the ten commandments. That comes next! Amazing courage! Did Aaron enjoy being invited up with him? Through him and his son's would come the priesthood.

The preacher and writer Peter Lewis puts it like this in his wonderful book, 'The Message of the Living God.' *"The God we worship is awesome, and our worship of him must never lose the element of appropriate awe. He is our Father, but he is our holy and heavenly Father, a father like no other, the Lord, the King. We may not stroll up to him with our hands in our pockets, whistling."*

As a Church, and certainly as a nation, we have lost our fear of God. I hope and pray that a day is coming when the God of Sinai will return to this nation is reviving power and holiness. If God does return and come down by the power of the Holy Spirit – there will be no 'quiet revival.' The nation will be shaken like Sinai was, and the appropriate fear of God and respect for his laws will return to a nation that has badly lost its way. A true and God-honouring knowledge of God's power, awesome nature and holiness is the main distinguishing mark of any true revival of religion. Human pride crumbles and is vanquished in the presence of the God of Moses. People spend a lot more time on their knees with their faces to the ground when God draws near in his awesome power. I close with the words of two OT prophets. Their longing must be ours too.

**(Read Isaiah 64: 1-4 and Habakkuk 3: 1-2)**

**Amen!**

(Revd Peter J Clarkson 1.2.26)

