



## 13. A Kingdom of Priests Exodus 19

One thing I find about Scripture is its capacity to surprise even despite having studied it for decades. And as I looked at chapter 19 to prepare for this evening I found something I had never seen here before, and not read or heard someone preach about it until this week. In fact who preaches on Exodus 19? They usually switch straight from the defeat of Amalek to the 10 commandments and leave 19 out without as much as a by your leave. Shame that, because it has a nugget in it that most Christians associate with the church but not with Israel. So let's get into chapter 19 and see what that is.

Month two turned into month 3 and the people move from Rephidim to Sinai where God had planned a reception for them! Quite whether the modern Sinai is the same as the Biblical one is questionable – read the commentators and make your choice. Some say that because smoke and fire was involved, that it must have been a volcano, but that isn't necessarily so. Remember what we explored in an earlier week. That's just looking for "rational" explanations for the miraculous and none of these really wash in Exodus. The only people who want rational explanations are rationalists.

This is the preparation for what was going to turn this group of people into a nation under God. And after 3 months of adventure in the wilderness, the people were probably asking the question "what are we doing here. What is the purpose of God in all this". And the answer comes back in Exodus 19. This is another chapter that often gets skipped in sermon series. Preachers are more interested in giving us the rules and regs to see that this chapter frames the 10 Commandments and without it, we miss what the purpose of the law.

And what do we find out as we read this passage. It's an act of grace – without the word grace being there. God was making them someone - "You saw what I, the Lord, did to the Egyptians and how I carried you as an eagle carries her young on her wings, and brought you here to me. *5 Now, if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own people. The whole earth is mine, but you will be my chosen people, 6 a people dedicated to me alone, and you will serve me as priests.*" The NIV has more familiar and more accurate words: *6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'* And that's the surprise phrase.

You may be astonished that I never knew that Israel were a kingdom of priests. Perhaps you knew that already – well, there's always a first time for everybody to find something out. It's not a phrase we associate with the people of Israel but we always associate it with the church: in fact, the whole theology of Baptist churches is founded on the priesthood of all believers. But here it is in Exodus 19:5-6 and are the same words repeated in 1 Peter 3:9 *But you are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvellous light.* Or perhaps likewise from Revelation 1: *4 From John to the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace be yours from God, who is, who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits in front of his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first to be raised from death and who is also the ruler of the kings of the world. He loves us, and by his sacrificial death he has freed us from our sins 6 and made us a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father. To Jesus Christ be the glory and power for ever and ever! Amen*

These are our precious words. But before they were the Church's words, they were Israel's. The same function that is given to the church under the new covenant, is the same as was under the old. Why? Because God doesn't change and His dealings with man have only ever been on one basis – grace.

But, you may say, didn't God go on to appoint a Levitical priesthood in Israel? He certainly did. But

before all the arrangements for the Levitical priesthood were given, the people of Israel understood that they were also a kingdom of priests. Actually read down to later in the chapter and you'll see that in embryo, Levites were already priests. Torah would make their role and function clear.

This begs the question – what is a priest? God made Israel priests – He made us priests. What does a priest do?

A priest in almost all religious traditions is someone who is able to represent others to God because a priest one who has been granted access to Him. Israel had been granted access to God. That gave them privileges and responsibilities. The privilege is that they could do it. Their responsibility is that they could represent others – they had both the authority and ability to do so. And in Christ, the privileges and responsibilities have passed to us as those grafted in to replace those who have been pruned out because they reject Christ.

That said look into any dictionary and you will always read of how priests are people appointed to carry out religious rites e.g. clergy in the RC and Anglican communions. How did that come about? In Exodus, the nation may have been priests, but out of them, the Levites were appointed as the priestly tribe and did all the doings associated with the formal worship of Israel. But each man and each woman included in that nation had every right to approach God personally because by His grace, God had ordained that. The development of synagogues in the absence of the priesthood in the time of the captivity in Babylon is evidence of that.

So there were priests and Priests in Israel. In Christ, the model of worship that developed in the early centuries developed along synagogue lines. Leadership tended to be in the form of Elders and Deacons. One word for elder is the word presbuteros (presbyter) which can mean elder, but it can mean priest in Greek. In the first three centuries, it meant elder as people affirmed the priesthood of all believers. So where did Christian priests come from? Under Constantine, the church emerged from being an illegal underground organisation with many factions and parts into being the state religion of Rome. How were they going to be organised? What laws were they going to adopt. They looked into the Bible and the only law they could find that dealt with social organisation was the Torah – so they made their own version of it. In fact, the laws of our own land down to this day are based on Torah. And it's broadly good stuff. The problem was that in church organisation, the same principles were adopted, even though the reasons for priests and sacrifices had been long gone and the church functioned perfectly without a priesthood. Leadership therefore eventually passed into the hands of ordained men and women. Is that scriptural if we are a kingdom of priests as Peter and John said? "Yes" our Anglican friends would say, because in Israel there were priests and Priests, so in the new Israel there are going to be priests and Priests.

Why don't we do the same here? What happened to Torah when Jesus died? For Episcopalians it was modified and adapted to take account of the death of Christ, but for Baptists we would take the view that we believe more scriptural, that when Jesus died and rose again, the Torah and all its requirements were fulfilled. All the Levitical acts which pointed to a more perfect way were no longer needed – we have a great high priest who has entered the most holy place once for all. Sacrifice and ritual are no longer needed. We are priests and we are represented by our great High Priest. We'll see in a few weeks how Christ has indeed fulfilled all the things the Tab pointed to. That's why I'm a presbyter, and elder, a pastor, and not a priest. Well I am, but all the people I lead are priests too so they can do all things any priest can – enter into God's presence, worship Him, speak to others of Him, lead others to Him, speak to Him on their behalf, and most importantly bring others into His forgiveness. Actually that's what all Israelites were tasked to do but often never did because they thought that was a special role that only the Priests could do.

Where does the priesthood of all believers leave us. First of all by affirming that our leaders do not have special access to God (that said Leadership is both a calling a role and a gift of the S[pirit]). We all have equal access to God as we are all appointed priests and indwelt with the same Holy Spirit. That said, we have leaders, we have shepherds who are tasked to act in that role of leadership. But God is always there, available to each of us. That's an encouragement isn't it. Let's use it to glorify God.