

Session 14 – Study Notes
January 16,2024
Exodus 19:1-25
Rev. Jan Cook-The Village Church

the·oph·a·ny THĕ'äfənĕ *noun*: a visible [manifestation](#) to [humankind](#) of God or a god. "the great theophany of Sinai, the burning bush, the pillar of fire"

1. The rest of the book of Exodus takes place on Mt. Sinai
2. The Hebrews spend 11 months at the foot of the mountain.
3. This section is a hinge section that constitutes the basis for all that follows.
4. This is an extremely complex section and there is a great deal of difficulty in its analyses largely due to its composite nature to which all the major Pentateuchal sources have contributed.
5. Despite almost a century of close, critical work, many of the major problems have resisted satisfactory solutions.
6. Some of the puzzling elements are:
 - Moses is pictured as ascending and descending Mount Sinai at least three times without any apparent purpose.
 - At times the people are pictured as fearful and standing at a great distance from the mountain, whereas at other times there are repeated warnings which are intended to prevent any of them from breaking forth and desecrating the sacred mountain.
 - Again, the description of God seems to fluctuate between God's dwelling on the mountain and only descending in periodical visits.
 - Finally, the theophany is portrayed both with the imagery of volcanic smoke and fire as well as with that of clouds and thunder of a rainstorm.
7. The revelation of Mount Sinai – which is the central episode of Judaism was unique in the religious history of humankind.
 - Only in Judaism was God's self-disclosure not to an individual or a group but to an entire nation, young and old, men and women and children, the righteous and the unrighteous alike.
8. Our text makes it a point for the reader to understand the importance that the nation "saw" the past and "saw God's presence in the events."
9. By triple negatives, God eliminates the most normal transactions that, through time and space, communicate God's involvement in the world:
 - By cultural traditions passed from generation to generation
 - By the language of a messenger
 - By the testimony of a witness to those who have not seen.
10. God wants the Hebrew people to become aware of His singular love for them.
 - This personal knowledge then becomes the basis of a demand: "Now, if you will listen faithfully to Me and keep My covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples (19:5)

11. The fact that a metaphor is used at this most significant and serious moment, theologically considered, in world history, is surprising. Except for the poetic text of the Song of the Sea, this is the only metaphor in the entire Exodus narrative.
12. In 19:9, God will speak in such a public way to Moses for this purpose: to convince the people – now and forever - that Moses is a mediator of the word of God and not his own opinion.
13. All the earth-shaking phenomena are for a special purpose: the people’s believing that what Moses says come from God.
14. The proper response to what God has said and done is not fright but reverence, which is not the same as obedience; It is a deeply engaged centering of the self upon God as Lord.
15. For the people such an event is extraordinary, and the preparations serve several purposes.
 - It impresses on them that this is a real thing, an actual divine appearance.
 - To let emerge the more profound connection between the people of God and God.
16. The climax to the whole scene comes in v. 19.
 - When the sound of the horn had reached its greatest intensity, Moses is seen talking with God and God is heard answering in a voice.
 - Moses had indeed been legitimated as God’s special instrument, just as he promised.
17. It has long been considered that verses 20-25 disturb the flow of the narrative. But in reality
 - These verses are in the service of the twofold purpose of this section as a whole:
 To center the people on the reality of the divine presence
 To clarify the role of Moses as intermediary.
 - Literally, these verses slow the flow of activity to lift up what is yet to come.
18. It is not simply being in the divine presence or hearing God speak to Moses that is finally central: It is what God actually says.

REFLECTIONS

1. Why was the “theophany” so important to the ancients and do you think these phenomena have a place in modern day? Do we experience theophanies today?
2. This chapter is all about preparation to meet God. How might we better prepare ourselves to “meet God” on Sunday mornings or in our prayer time or our daily living?
3. Using the definition of reverence from question 14, share how you position yourself to move into this experience.

Sources

1. The Book of Exodus by Brevard Childs
2. Exodus (Interpretation) by Terence Fretheim
3. The Particulars of Rapture by Rabbi Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg
4. Covenant and Conversation by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
5. The New Interpreter’s Bible