

**Distinct**  
Exodus 19:1-6  
June 7, 2026

“Who are *you*?” the Caterpillar asked a confused Alice. “Wonderland” had thrown her expectations about the world—and her place in it—in turmoil.<sup>1</sup> And who would feel any differently, standing, at that moment, three inches tall and conversing with a caterpillar? “I hardly know,” she said, “I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”<sup>2</sup> If you’ve read the story, you’ll know that Alice’s so-called “adventures” cause her to question who *she* is. As the story progresses, not only is Alice confused, but readers are left wondering, “Will Alice hold on to her child-like tendencies? Or will she let go of them for life in the world of adults, however odd it may be?”

Identity involves more than simply answering the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”<sup>3</sup> Each of us is influenced by our experiences with people, places, and events. Each of us is influenced even by our own perception of ourselves.<sup>4</sup> But for God’s people, no element frames our image more powerfully than our relationship with the LORD. He defines who we are.

As we turn the page from Exodus 18 to chapter 19, the LORD is clarifying this very question for Israel. They know who *He* is, at least in part. He has revealed Himself these last 18 chapters. He is the **strength and song** and **salvation** of Israel (Ex. 15:2). He stands alone **among the gods**; He is distinct in majesty, unique in power (15:11). He is a faithful Redeemer (15:13), a terrifying Opponent (15:16), and worthy of both fear and trust (14:31). This revelation of God has written Israel a history.

But everything has changed for the people since they “got up” the morning following the Passover. After centuries of oppression, they are now free from bondage, but also homeless and wandering in an undeveloped landscape. A million people need resources and organization and purpose. In the midst of all that, Israel struggles to answer the question, “Who are *you*?”

But in these 6 verses, the Lord encounters no such struggle. In fact, in very precise terms, He tells the people who they are, how they became who they are, and what their identity means for their way of life. And all of that definition revolves around the axis of Yahweh Himself.

And this text is not insignificant. What I just read is a summary of, not only the book of Exodus, but all 5 books of Moses, and the entire Old Testament, which, as we keep reading, causes us to wonder, “Will Israel hold on to her ungodly tendencies? Or will she let go of them for life as the *distinct* people of God?”

We’ve seen God distinguish between Israel and Egypt in several of the plagues already (e.g. Exodus 8:22; 9:4; 11:7). But the distinction expands far beyond the borders of Egypt and results in much more than safety amidst the plagues. Today, we’ll think about a *distinct leader*, representing a *distinct God*, who is forming a *distinct people*. First, a distinct leader.

### **I. A Distinct Leader (1-3)**

Moses’ separateness from other men began long before Exodus 19. His mother considered him a **fine child** (2:2) (of course she did!). The Egyptian princess thought him worthy of **pity** (2:6). Jethro’s daughters praised him for his chivalry (2:18). But none of those qualities set Moses apart. The voice calling out of the burning bush, the voice of God, transformed Moses from a unique man

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<sup>1</sup> Critics may disagree why Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice in Wonderland*, but the tale makes sense as a parable of growing up, in my opinion.

<sup>2</sup> Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, 48.

<sup>3</sup> Which is good news for most of us. Has anyone achieved what he proposed at age seven?

<sup>4</sup> Trueman, *Strange New World*, 112–13.

to a servant of the Lord. **Come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt** (3:10). **I will be with you**, the Lord said. God chose Moses to lead His people out of bondage. In fact, it would be impossible to imagine Israel's exodus apart from Moses' leadership. The LORD delivered His people, truly, by means of Moses.

And to confirm His commission in chapter 3, the Lord added this sign, **when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain** (3:12)<sup>5</sup>—the same mountain Israel arrives at in Exodus 19.<sup>6</sup> No doubt, Moses remembered the sign, because in verses 1-2, Moses isn't simply introducing this new phase in the Exodus timeline (though 19:1 does that) but highlighting that the sign is being fulfilled. **In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. When they set out from Rephidim, they came into the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain.**<sup>7</sup>

The phrase that makes this sequence significant is **on that very day**. They've wandered a few months, moved camp a few times. But **on that very day**, God answered the sign. If Moses had owned a smartphone, maybe he would have avoided posting a reel of the conflict with Amalek, but maybe he would have set a reminder—“Arrived at Sinai”. And by way of this arrival, Moses has been fully established as the leader of God's people—the leader appointed by God, the leader equipped by God, the leader through whom God speaks.

That's not to say that chapter 19 is at odds with Jethro's counsel in chapter 18. Quite the opposite! Chapter 19 shows us Moses able to fulfill, almost immediately, the role Jethro described. He told Moses, **You be the people's representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do** (18:19-20). That is precisely what Moses does in the next half of Exodus, fulfilling the role of mediator between Yahweh and Israel.

This is the distinction in the man, Moses. God speaks to Him and He speaks to God, **face to face, as a man speaks to a friend** (Ex. 32:12). He has a kind of access to God that is not typical of anyone else—and not just access, but representative access. He hears from God to speak to the people, and he speaks to God what he has heard from the people.<sup>8</sup> Both of these functions of a mediator are present in chapter 19, vividly portrayed in the way Moses goes **up to God** (19:3, 20, 24) and **down to the people** (19:14, 21, 24, 25).<sup>9</sup> Verse 3, the distinction of Moses is clear: the people are camped in front of the mountain, but **Moses went up to God**—only Moses.

He went **up** to hear from **the Lord**, who **called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel.”** Thanks be to God for the Bible. We need not live with some of the limitations Israel realized. We have the written revelation. We read, and God's words are transmitted right to our own minds and hearts. But that was not the case in real time for Israel. Moses **went up**, and the people waited for him to come down. They would hear from God only when Moses later recited the words God gave him.

The people, then, must submit themselves to this one man for all their interaction with God. Would they be delivered? Yes—through the leadership of Moses. Would they hear from God? Yes—through the lips of Moses. Would they know how to serve God? Yes—through the instruction of Moses. If Israel would persist with the Lord, they would do so only so far as they

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<sup>5</sup> The final “you” in 3:12 is plural; all the others are singular, as if to say, “when you (Moses) have brought the people out of Egypt, you (all) shall worship God at this mountain.”

<sup>6</sup> Stuart, *Exodus*, 420.

<sup>7</sup> Apparently, Moses was already camped at the mountain (18:5), presumably near the water-rock (17:6), while the whole assembly did not arrive in a permanent fashion until 19:2.

<sup>8</sup> See also, e.g. Exodus 18:19.

<sup>9</sup> Morales, *Exodus Old and New*, 83.

persisted under the one mediator God had appointed between Him and them. Not just anyone is sufficient to go before them with the Lord.

So, Moses ascends the mountain to receive God's message for the people, a message that begins with a reminder of the One who made Israel who they are. This is what we see in verse 4.

## II. A Distinct God (4)

God said, verse 4 - **You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians.** Even if I read that phrase in the most emphatic tones, those 6 words hardly do justice to what they represent. **What I did to the Egyptians...?! That's like saying, "You heard what the iceberg did to the Titanic, right...?" Or, "Did you see what a spark did to that rocket last week...?"**<sup>10</sup> We've heard 15 sermons, regarding 10 chapters<sup>11</sup> of all that God **did to the Egyptians.** Israel's memories of those events would, no doubt, widen eyes, open mouths, and mesmerize hearts.<sup>12</sup> He and He alone is the Lord, who showed his **power and proclaimed His name through all the earth (9:16)** by what He **did to the Egyptians.**

Not only Egypt, but the surrounding nations,<sup>13</sup> learned that Yahweh is the Lord—over every proud nation and over every hollow idol. And it is Yahweh who now speaks to Israel. Fear, awe, belief, trust, what would Israel not give after seeing what God did to Egypt? A lot, actually. Apparently, the human heart hasn't changed much in a few thousand years. "Forgetful" and "stubborn" have described people since at least Exodus 16.

But what God **did** to the Egyptians merely jumpstarted His work of deliverance. He applied His power to the specific case of Israel's bondage. **I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself.** Americans may cling to the bald eagle as an emblem of national strength and what *we* have accomplished, but this epic-sized image<sup>14</sup> of eagles' wings implies quite the opposite for Israel. Back in chapter 2, all Israel could do was **sigh**, and **cry out**, and **groan (2:23-24)**. Hope otherwise lost. It was the Lord who **remembered His covenant** and acted. Powerfully, tenderly, safely, the Lord carried Israel out of harm's way, like an eagle with a payload of helpless offspring.

Notice who did what in verse 4. The Lord says, **what I did to the Egyptians...I bore you...and brought you...** What about Israel? **You yourselves have seen.** Simply watched. They were witnesses and receivers of God's deliverance, but not workers. And notice when these things happened. I *did*, I *bore* you, I *brought* you to Myself—previously, in the past, already.

In verse 5, God will call for the people's commitment, but before He does, He's declaring in verse 4 His own covenantal commitment to them, a pledge which goes back to at least Genesis 12; the exodus is simply God displaying faithfulness to His previous promise. God uses this reminder to assert Himself as worthy of His demand. Not as payment for services rendered, but as worshipful reply from a grateful people.

He has been, already, uniquely, gracious, in his deliverance, therefore, He is distinctly worthy of His people's obedience, a people who will be distinct themselves as they continue as the people of God. See a distinct people in vv. 5-6, which elaborate what this continued relationship with God looks like. The people have an obligation, and the Lord makes more promises.

## III. A Distinct People (5-6)

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<sup>10</sup> With reference to Blue Origin's New Glenn rocket, which was completely destroyed after exploding in a test sequence.

<sup>11</sup> With reference to Exodus 5-15.

<sup>12</sup> Check out the references to the Exodus in Psalms for proof.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Joshua 2:10-11; 5:1

<sup>14</sup> Consider Tolkien's repeated mode of rescue in *The Hobbit*.

Keep in mind, God has already delivered; deliverance is not part of the question. The question is “Will Israel respond properly? Will their devotion to Him match His devotion to them?” That’s the question of continuing obedience to the Bible—not as a condition for deliverance, per se. But as a distinguishing mark of those who have already been delivered. And the Lord’s words here follow the pattern that is always true of participation in God’s covenant. God delivers; He calls His people to obedience; He promises to bless their faithfulness. Grace always begins the equation.<sup>15</sup>

The terms of the covenant follow next. God will soon lay out the specific commands of the Law along with some of their application in the next several chapters. But first, He speaks in more general terms. **If you will indeed obey My voice and keep my covenant** defines God’s design for His people. “Give me your whole-hearted obedience,” God says, even without knowing all I intend. “I am completely, utterly, unquestionably trustworthy, remember? Listen to everything I say with open ears and ready hearts to hear and heed and love Me. Believe that I will continue to do just as I have already done.”

God doesn’t manage resentful employees. He calls His children to listen to their Father, who gave them life (Proverbs 23:22). He gathers sheep who hear His voice and follow Him (John 10:27). He assembles a congregation of people who recognize the superior worth of knowing and being known by God (Galatians 4:9) and they give their profoundest effort to guard that relationship. How better to guard the relationship than by obedience to all that God says? God’s Word guards their holiness, God’s Word guides their worship, God’s Word gives them purpose. A proper response to God’s deliverance embraces complete devotion to God’s Word.

**If** Israel will continue in that pattern, **then** they will continue to enjoy God’s promise. He has singled them out through deliverance. They’ll remain distinct by whole-hearted obedience. This distinction is bound up in three titles the Lord blends together to paint a vibrant picture of Israel’s identity. They are distinct as a people, distinct as a kingdom, and distinct as a nation.

The Lord calls them first, verse 5, **My own possession among all peoples. Among all peoples**, Israel is the people He has chosen. Out of the many—the one Israel He calls “My people.”

This reminds me of the word *provenance*. I first learned it in high school, not because I was interested in French etymology, but because my parents watched *Antiques Roadshow* on PBS. I learned then that some historical pieces are valuable for what they are—an original Monet, a classic John Deere. Other pieces are valuable, not much in themselves, but because of provenance—this background story that makes the piece significant. Imagine this presentation... “We have here a toothbrush which dates to the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century”—even with age, it’s likely not worth much; but the value skyrockets when collectors hear the rest of the presentation... “this toothbrush was one of the first owned by a young George Washington in 1755...” Toothbrushes abound; toothbrushes are common; toothbrushes can even be a bit repulsive, but if George Washington owned it...instant treasure.

In no way is God attending only to Israel, though. He declares in verse 5, **all the earth is Mine**. After 10 plagues, even Egypt and Pharaoh recognized that nothing and no one is outside God’s sphere of authority. But of all the earth, of all the people that the earth contains, He carries one people as His own, as His distinct **possession**. He has brought an otherwise common people close to Himself so they might relate to Him in ways the rest of the world does not. Not because of any inherent quality in them, but simply because of the Lord’s choice.

Their choice status means Israel shall be a **kingdom of priests**. That’s not to say that Israel was a collection of Moses look-a-likes. Only Moses had face-to-face access to God. And neither would every individual have the privilege of what we think of as priestly service in the tabernacle.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 187–88.

<sup>16</sup> Korah’s crew found out the hard way in Numbers 16.

But no other kingdom owned the privilege of representation before God. When Moses and the Levitical priests performed a particular activity, both stood before God on behalf of Israel.<sup>17</sup> Through their offerings, their sacrifices, their prayers, all Israel was represented before the Lord. In that way, worship was possible for Israel in ways unknown to every other kingdom of the world.

As a kingdom of priests, worship was not only possible, but also the main concern, and the primary feature that marked out Israel as distinct—not world domination or military conquest, not democracy or virtuous citizenship, but worshipful service to the Lord who is King over His people.

Thirdly, Israel's choice status meant that she should be **a holy nation**. Along with “people” and “kingdom,” the Old Testament also sometimes uses “nation” to designate the people of God. They are on the verge of organizing as a political entity, with features like a law and a land.<sup>18</sup> But most often we read “nation” and think *outsiders*. Every other nation is outside the scope of God's promise to Israel.

Once again, the Lord is distinguishing His people among all the others. Israel shall be a nation, but with an emphasis on **holy**, set apart, devoted entirely to the purposes of the Lord,<sup>19</sup> a wholly-other kind of nation, reflecting His character to the world. They are to be categorically different from all the other nations on earth,<sup>20</sup> wearing holiness like a garment more distinct than Waldo's stripes. *In* the world, but not *of* the world, as an earlier generation might say. And not of the world in such a way that the world knows it.

These three titles imply that the God who made Himself known to Moses, and to Israel, and to Egypt, intends to be known far beyond Moses, and Israel, and Egypt. He intends to use Israel to make Himself known in all the earth. But in order to do well *what* the Lord intends, they must be *who* the Lord intends.

Who are *you*, Israel? Alice might say, “I hardly know...” But God would have Israel confidently say, “We are the Lord's.” He delivered them *out* of Egypt. He delivered them *to* Himself. He speaks to them. He covenants with them. He owns them. They are His—a family fathered by God, a kingdom ruled by God, a nation governed by God. And they will enjoy all the privileges of that status **if...**

That one little word makes all the difference. Israel is bound to obey every precept of the Law. But open to virtually any page of the Old Testament, and you'll realize quickly that Israel was impotent for the task. She will not obey *every* precept of the Law. She frequently forfeits God's blessings. In fact, even before Moses finally descends Mt. Sinai, the nation has rebelled against what God just said. **If** presents an ominous prospect.

Of all the people on earth, surely Israel—who knows the God who delivers—would obey His voice. But Israel suffers the problem of all humanity. Israel is consistently imitating her former master<sup>21</sup>, and continually preferring her old condition.<sup>22</sup> Sin plagues all humanity.

Minus one. One man obeyed God's voice and kept His covenant, and this man, Jesus Christ, is described in 1 Peter 2:4 as **choice** and **precious in the sight of God**. Peter implies that Christ achieved God's design for Israel, so He received the status God promised to Israel. And through Him, the church is able to worship God. Through Him, the church owns the titles once reserved for Israel (2:9): **a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own**

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<sup>17</sup> Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known*, 91, points to the priestly garments as an illustration of this fact. The breastplate included 12 stones with the names of the 12 tribes engraved on them.

<sup>18</sup> Beale and Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 1031.

<sup>19</sup> See Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 4ff. for holiness as “devotion to God.”

<sup>20</sup> Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known*, 94.

<sup>21</sup> A fickle Pharaoh, flopping between outright disobedience and half-hearted remorse.

<sup>22</sup> As if the measly pleasures of captivity are worth more than the riches of obeying God

**possession.** Through Him, the church owns the privilege once assigned to Israel: **proclaiming the excellencies of Him who called us.**

So hear this new pronouncement. Not, ***If you will obey My voice and keep My covenant...then*** you shall enjoy a favored status. Not, ***If you do, then you shall be.*** But we proclaim to you the gospel which says, not if, but *since!* *Since* Christ has obeyed and kept the covenant...*Since* Christ has done, therefore we *are* God's own possession. Israel would never succeed, and Christ never failed.<sup>23</sup>

This is the critical question. Have you put off former associations and believed in Christ? Believing that, just as Israel would find it impossible to live up to that **if...**, so do you. Believing that only Jesus Christ has ever measured up to God's Law. Believing that you need Him, like Israel needed Moses, to represent you before God. Believing that, in Him, the **precious value** that belongs to Him, God assigns to you. In Christ, God has made us the people He called Israel to be: a distinct people, devoted to the Lord, fulfilling His purpose. So we come to Him, and when we sin, we keep coming to Him. And we have God's acceptance.

One may ask, "What's the point of obedience?" If I won't obey perfectly, and God accepts me in Christ, what does it matter? But that's the wrong question. Israel wouldn't respond, "Obey???...for what?" God offers no quid pro quo. The question for Israel is "Do you love God?" Likewise, Jesus said (John 14:15), **If you love me, you will keep my commandments.** The proper question is, "Do you love Him?"

## **Conclusion**

Maybe the best way to explain identity is in terms of relationship. In the children's story, Alice struggled because she wanted to fit in with the world around her yet always stuck out. Israel is finding out that to be God's own possession means *not* being like the rest of the world. That's because God never intended for His people to "fit in," but to be distinct for the sake of proclaiming His excellencies. Who are you? If you are in Christ, you are distinct, you are the Lord's.

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<sup>23</sup> Gladd, *From Adam and Israel to the Church*, 139.