

MOSES ON MT. SINAI

EXODUS 19

Ninety days after leaving Egypt, the Israelites moved from Rephidim to the base of Mt. Sinai or Horeb. In Exodus 17:6, Mt. Horeb was identified as the place where Moses struck the rock and provided water for the Israelites who had to travel from Rephidim to obtain it. This was probably not more than a few miles, but that would have been quite a chore. Moving to the base of the mountain made obtaining water from this source much easier.

Exodus 19:1–2 ¹In 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 [סִנְיַי]. ²When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai [סִנְיַי] and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain.

Exodus 17:6 ⁶“Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.

This area is located in what is a desolate, waterless desert; it is part of the wilderness of sin. Without the miraculous provision of water, they would not have been able to camp there for ten months and nineteen days which is the time indicated in Numbers 10:11.

Numbers 10:11–12 ¹¹Now in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth of the month, the cloud was lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony; ¹²and the sons of Israel set out on their journeys from the wilderness of Sinai. Then the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran.

Of course, God wanted them there in that place, so providing water for them was not a problem for Him. Remember, Yahweh told Moses he would

bring the Israelites to this mountain, the very mountain where Moses received His call to service revealed in Exodus 3, in order to worship Him there.

Exodus 3:1, 12 ¹Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ... ¹²And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."

The wilderness of Sinai is simply identifying the desert area around this mountain; it is a smaller area within the larger area known as the wilderness of sin, סִינַי, which is the origin of the name "Sinai," סִינַי. The etymology suggests Sinai is located somewhere in this wilderness area.

We do not know the exact location of Mt. Sinai. The traditional site, like so many in the Holy Land, was designated as such by Helena, Constantine's mother. The story is she went to the Holy land in the fourth century and paid people to show her where many of the biblical places were located and in order to be paid, they were more than willing to show her a place and claim that was the location for the specific incident about which she was inquiring. She ordered the building of a chapel at the site called the Chapel of the Burning Bush. This location is on a mountain called Jebal Musa (or Jabal Musa).

A number of men in the last forty years or so have claimed that Mt. Sinai is actually Jabal al lawz in Saudi Arabia east of the Gulf of Aqaba. Many biblical archaeologists dispute this claim. You can find books and videos to support this, but they really don't make their case. *Bible and Spade* archaeology magazine had a refutation of these claims in vol. 13, no. 4, Fall 2000 issue. These profession-

al archaeologists also claim Mt. Sinai must be further north than thought because the Israelites couldn't travel from the traditional sight in the southern Sinai Peninsula to Kadesh Barnea in the time the Bible allots. This author suggested Mt. Sinai is Jebel Sin Bishr which is further north of the traditional site.¹ The bottom line is we don't know exactly where Mt. Sinai is located.

St. Catherine's monastery was built during the period from 548-565 at the northern foot of the mountain. It is an autonomous Eastern Orthodox church and it is the oldest continuously inhabited monastery in the world. It's called St. Catherine's Monastery, but the actual name is the Sacred Monastery of the God-Trodden Mount Sinai. Their library is magnificent. It has the second largest collection of early codices and manuscripts in the world consisting of 3,300 manuscripts written in 11 languages. The oldest is from the fourth century. The *Codex Sinaiticus* was written in the fourth century and it was found there. It plays a large role in translating the Bible to this day. It also has the largest collection of icons in the world dating from the Byzantine era. An orthodox priest commented on a YouTube video that he thought it an interesting juxtaposition as he put it that they had this huge collection of icons at the very place where God prohibited the making of graven images! Perhaps he should think a little bit more about that situation?

God called Moses onto the mountain and gave him some instructions concerning what he was to say to the sons of Israel.

¹ Gordon Franz, "Is Mount Sinai in Saudi Arabia?" in *Bible and Spade* 13, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 101-118.

Exodus 19:3–6 ³Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: ⁴‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and *how* I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. ⁵‘Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession [תְּגִלָּה] among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; ⁶and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy [קִדְוָה] nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.”

God had something to say to the house of Jacob, the sons of Israel and He was going to say it through His prophet, Moses. He called Moses up onto the mountain to tell him what he was to say to the people.

The first thing He wanted Moses to do was remind the people of the things they had seen with their own eyes concerning His miraculous intervention in Egypt that resulted in their freedom. Then He wanted Moses to remind them of the miraculous work He did to bring them out of Egypt and into the Sinai. He used the metaphor of transporting them on eagle's wings to make the point. The Israelites were already God's people, but by bringing them to Himself, He intended to bring them into a covenant relationship, a personal, familial relationship. When they realized all the Lord did for them, they should respond to Him in obedient gratitude. That's an application for us as well. We should be responding to the fact Jesus died for us on the cross in obedient gratitude.

Deuteronomy 4:34–37 ³⁴“Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within *another* nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? ³⁵“To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him. ³⁶“Out of the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; and on earth He let you see His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire. ³⁷“Because He

loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power,

The concept that Israel is God's possession is interesting. Possession, *הֵגְלָה*, means treasured possession; it refers to valued personal property, to what is owned by someone for which the owner has special affection or holds special value. It also refers to a unique possession. It could have been translated "a unique treasure" rather than simply as "possession." This marks the beginning of a more intimate relationship between God and Israel. This treasured possession that is Israel has a special part to play in God's plan for history. Christians who fail to understand that biblical truth, cannot understand God's purpose for history in any way—past, present, or future.

Up to this point, the only covenant mentioned concerning the Israelites was the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant made with the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Abrahamic Covenant assumed the nation would eventually be formed as part of the seed aspect of the Covenant but that the formal recognition of the people as a nation under the theocratic rule of God was only at this time coming into existence, the sojourn in Egypt and the subsequent Exodus being the first stages of forming them into that nation. At that point in time, the Israelites had no idea what this covenant was going to be. This covenant, which we call the Mosaic Covenant, was going to be made with the house of Jacob, the sons of Israel. The Mosaic Covenant and all its laws, commandments, and ordinances were going to be applicable to only Israel. Any

Christian trying to apply the Law to the church, does not understand God's program to, for, and with Israel and their role in God's plan for history.

The parties to this upcoming covenant were clearly identified: "I," Yahweh, and "you," the house of Jacob, the sons of Israel.

Yahweh informed Moses what His expectations for the Israelites were as people in a covenant relationship with Him.

First, they would become a people set apart from all the other people in the world as God's unique possession which would be a position no other nation on earth would ever enjoy. God created them to assume that position as a nation, but they didn't know that yet. It still seems to be something they have never really understood and embraced. To this day, all they really want is be like all the other nations of the world, but that will never happen; they are unique among the nations of the world whether they like it or not—and in this age, most of them don't like it. The Israelites did not deserve to have this intimate relationship with God. It was strictly God's creation of them to be His people and His appointment of them to be the people through whom He would reveal Himself to the world that they were in that position. His work with Israel was to His glory and it was a major part of His plan to restore the created order that was so damaged in the rebellion of Adam. God is the God of the world and the people in it, but the Israelites are a special people to Him.

Deuteronomy 9:6 ⁶“Know, then, *it is* not because of your righteousness *that* the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people.

Ezekiel 36:22²²“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went.

The if/then nature of these words indicates there will be conditions built into the relationship God has entered into with the Israelites. The conditions will involve obedience to God's commands and keeping His covenant. How all those elements interact with one another will be spelled out throughout the Pentateuch culminating in the presentation of blessings for obedience and fidelity and curses for disobedience and rebellion revealed in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 followed by the Land Covenant in Deuteronomy 30:1-10. The fact that Israel is the people of God was due to God's deliberate creation of them to be just that, His people; to the extent they reflected that in their national life was up to them. They haven't done that well to this point in history, but one day they will. One day they will be the faithful kingdom of priests God called them to be.

By proclaiming the earth belongs to Him, God is making a statement that He is the only true God. Paganism generally involves worshiping the creation rather than the Creator and through His relationship with Israel, God is going to show the world how faulty that line of thinking really is.

Second, Israel was also appointed by Yahweh to be a kingdom of priests. Kingdom expresses the concept of God's rule on earth and the office of priest acts as the mediator between God and man. Israel was appointed to be the conduit through whom God would be revealed to the nations of the world and

through whom people could be brought to God. This was part of what was meant when God said Abraham would be a blessing to the world. Jesus highlighted, in no uncertain terms, that by the time of His First Advent, the priests and the nation had utterly failed in their task.

Matthew 23:15 ¹⁵“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

Third, they were commanded to be a holy nation. Holy, קדוש, means to be sacred and consecrated; it pertains to what is dedicated in service to God. It is the opposite of what is common or carnal. As a nation they were to be set apart from all other nations as God's representative to them. They were also to be set apart in terms of actions and conduct as such things were going to be spelled out in the Mosaic Law they were about to receive and in that way, they were to represent the holiness of God to the world. The Law was not meant to be a legalistic straightjacket which the religious leadership eventually turned it into; it was to be a guide for holy living. The Lord's Sermon on the Mount addressed that issue when He offered the Kingdom to Israel. Holiness didn't earn them anything, but it would allow them to enjoy all the blessings that being in a relationship with God could bring. From our vantage point in time, we know the Israelites ultimately failed to honor this directive both as a nation and as individuals and were temporally punished as a result. But in one way they were very successful because the Jews authored the Scriptures which continue to reveal God

to the world to this day and those Scriptures now encompass the entire world and not just the Israeli area of the Middle East.

By being a holy nation and serving as priests, the expectation was the world would wonder about this God of the Israelites and seek Him out.

God wanted Moses to remind the Israelites that He bore them on eagle's wings to bring them out of Egypt. This is a metaphor for His work in bringing them to safety based on the fact that eagles will push their young out of the nest when it's time for them to learn to fly, but they will fly with them and bear them back up again, if necessary in order to keep them from falling to their death. This is a metaphorical description of God's providential work in preserving Israel and keeping Satan from exterminating them. A similar verse using the metaphor of eagle's wings is used in Revelation to describe the Remnant's flight into the wilderness where she would receive divine protection from the antichrist.

Revelation 12:14 ¹⁴But the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent.

The reason I'm bringing this Revelation verse up is because some so-called prophecy experts think the United States is identified in this Scripture and this country, the USA, sends aircraft into Israel to take the Jews to safety at that time. Of course, they relate that to the fact that our national bird is a bald eagle. What would they think if Benjamin Franklin had his way and our national bird was a wild turkey? The point is, this is just silly so don't be taken in by it. The United

States is destined to be just another nation in the world under the spell of the antichrist by the time that situation arrives. I'm sorry to say that Hal Lindsey was one of the propagators of this myth.

The final words of the Lord to Moses at that time were in the form of a command to pass His words on to the Israelites.

Most dispensationalist theologians recognize these verses, Exodus 19:4-6, as extremely important, significant theological truths revealed in the Old Testament. They form a bridge between Israel's creation as a nation to the fact of Israel's national servant relationship to Yahweh.

Theologians have long recognized the Mosaic Covenant to be a covenant in the form of a Suzerainty Treaty that identifies the covenant relationship between a ruler and his subordinate vassals. They generally had six elements: preamble, historical introduction, general principles for future conduct, specific stipulations, divine witnesses, curses for violating the covenant, and blessings for maintaining the covenant requirements. Very generally, the preamble is found in verse 3, the historical prologue in verse 4, statement of general principles in verse 5a, and the blessings in verses 5b and 6a.² The remainder of the covenant elements would be revealed later.

As God's prophet to the Israelites, Moses obediently took the Word of the Lord back to the Israelites.

² John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in Exodus*, 2nd ed. (Winona Lakes, IN: BMH, 1986), 203-204.

Exodus 19:7–9 ⁷So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. ⁸All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do!” And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD. ⁹The LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever.” Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD.

Moses didn't speak to all the people, he spoke to the elders who were presumably responsible for passing the Word of the Lord on to the people. Moses didn't add anything to the Word of the Lord nor did he take anything away from it. This is obviously an important command then and now.

Deuteronomy 4:2 ²“You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

Deuteronomy 12:32 ³²“Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it.

Once all the Israelites heard the Word of the Lord, they agreed to abide by it. As God's prophet, that is, as the mediator between God and the Israelites, Moses went back to the Lord and reported the people's agreement with His Word. They were agreeing to become God's covenant people. Did God really need Moses to tell Him that? Obviously not, but there is a protocol being established. At that time, not just anyone could approach God and not just in any manner they so chose to do it. This was the Creator God of the universe they were dealing with, and He had to be approached in the way He deemed appropriate. Time would reveal that the people didn't realize how little ability they would have to actually do all the Lord required of them, they didn't understand

the level of their sinfulness, and they didn't appreciate the enormity of God's holiness. In this dispensation, believers can approach the throne of God through the Savior as symbolized by the veil separating the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place being torn in two at the death of Christ on the cross.

Matthew 27:51 ⁵¹And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split.

Yahweh informed Moses He was going to speak to the prophet from a thick cloud and the people would be able to hear Him speaking. In that way, Moses was going to be authenticated as God's prophet which would memorialize his name forever. It would also verify the prophet's personal relationship with Yahweh. This encounter with Yahweh in the cloud on Mt. Sinai suggested a much more personal encounter with the Lord beyond that they had already experienced with the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that was God's leading presence before them as they made their way out of Egypt, yet they would still be spatially separated from Him. They could not intrude into any personal space God established on and around that mountain.

Then the Lord ordered Moses to have the people consecrate themselves in order to be prepared to see the cloud and hear the Lord speaking to Moses.

Exodus 19:10–11 ¹⁰The LORD also said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate [קִדְּשׁוּ] them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; ¹¹and let them be ready for the third day, for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

The Lord told Moses to consecrate the people. Consecrate, קִדְּשׁוּ, means to be sacred, to consecrate; it refers to being dedicated to service and loyalty to

God and so involving proper conduct as prescribed of any person or object so dedicated. In this way, the people would be making themselves acceptable to appear in the sight of God. This three-day time period was a time during which they were to prepare to meet their God.

Coming down in the sight of the people does not mean God would be physically seen any more than He was physically seen in the pillar of cloud and fire, but it does mean He would actually be present in this cloud on the mountain, and they would be able to see the cloud and hear His voice in whatever form that happened to be. Since He said He was going to be in the cloud, there was no reason to doubt that He was actually present in it. Scripture makes it clear no one can see the Lord and live.

Exodus 33:20 ²⁰But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!"

God provided further instructions for that meeting with the people.

Exodus 19:12–15 ¹²"You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. ¹³'No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." ¹⁴So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments. ¹⁵He said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman."

It is serious business to come into the presence of the Lord and the boundary set around the mountain that neither man nor beast could violate under the threat of the penalty of death was meant to highlight the seriousness of being in the presence of God. Yahweh is not an idol that can be handled

and carried around which is what the Israelites were used to as they were emerging out of a very pagan society before, during, and after their time spent in Egypt. His boundaries must be respected and honored because He is totally holy and He cannot be tainted by the common or profane. Sinful man, no matter how holy, cannot make Himself clean enough or holy enough to be in the presence of God. That doesn't mean there aren't things we can do to be holy, but ultimately it is glorification that will finally allow us to be in the presence of God completely holy. We know now that only the blood of Christ can do that, but that is a truth to be revealed in the far distant future. Violators were not to even be touched; they were to be shot with arrows or stoned to death. If this didn't impress the people with the seriousness of what was going on, nothing would.

A blast on a ram's horn would be the signal for the people to come up to the mountain as far as the boundary allowed. The one blowing the ram's horn is never identified; therefore, it seems likely this is some sort of supernatural blowing of what sounds like a ram's horn and verse 16 confirms that thought. Most theologians reject the idea of a horn but ascribe the sound to wind blowing around the mountain in the tumult of the theophany. The text says it's a ram's horn.

Once Moses received these instructions, he went back down the mountain and insured the people consecrated themselves and cleaned up according to the instructions he received in order to be acceptable and therefore able to stand before the Lord.

The final instruction was to abstain from marital relations. The three days of preparation before the theophany of the Lord were meant to be days of focusing on Yahweh and not on one another. This is a matter of ritual cleanliness and not immorality or sinfulness.

The Lord appeared in the cloud on the mountain on the third day.

Exodus 19:16–17 ¹⁶So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder [קול] and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.

We can only imagine how awesome and frightening this must have seemed to the Israelites, but they didn't have to imagine it; they saw it and they heard it and it scared them. While this was going on, Moses led them to the foot of the mountain so they could hear the Word of the Lord. Whatever the boundary was they could not go beyond, it must have come right up to the foot of the mountain. The English definition of foot refers to the lower or lowest part of something standing or perceived as standing vertically; the base or bottom. In Hebrew, foot, פֶּתַח, means lower, below, or lowest. At some point, the vertical nature of the mountain was discernable and that was apparently the point beyond which they were forbidden to go. Moses must have known exactly where they were to go and alternatively the line beyond which they could not go and he led them to that point and stationed them there. They were probably spread out for some distance since there were so many of them.

They couldn't have mistaken these manifestations as a volcanic eruption because there was no ash, no rocks being thrown into the air, no lava flowing, and no volcano ever sounds with a trumpet blast! However, that is exactly what the rationalistic skeptics want you to think. Humphreys, the rationalist English science professor wrote, "... the Old Testament description of an erupting volcano, even down to the details like the loud trumpet sound produced by gases escaping through cracks in the rocks. So I believe that the biblical description of Mount Sinai is literally true. This was no ordinary mountain; it was a very special mountain—a volcano. And not an extinct volcano either, but a volcano that erupted at precisely the time of the Exodus ..." ³ That there were some amazing physical manifestations of God's presence on this mountain there is no doubt, but claiming this was an active volcano next to which a multitude of people stood without harm is simply specious.

Once the people were assembled, the Lord's presence on that mountain in the midst of the cloud and smoke was manifested and His interaction with Moses began.

Exodus 19:18–19 ¹⁸Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. ¹⁹When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder [קול].

The top of the mountain must have looked like it was on fire; it resembled a large furnace engulfed in fire and smoke. The ground was shaking and the

³ Colin J. Humphreys, *The Miracles of Exodus: A Scientist's Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 310-311.

trumpet was continually sounding and growing louder. This was a violent shaking. Violently, *רַעַע*, means very, so greatly, utterly, and exceedingly; it pertains to a high point on a scale of extent. This had to have been a supernatural shaking of this mountain that didn't cause any damage; it could not have been a naturally occurring earthquake type of event. If it were natural, rocks and landslides would have taken place that would have killed and wounded people standing around the base of the mountain and the people would have fled. That didn't happen and it would have defeated the purpose of having them there. Much of this supernatural activity was probably taking place for hours as they assembled.

The physical characteristics of this event must have been awesome, frightening, and intimidating all at the same time. Then you consider the fact the people knew they were in the presence of the God who had just displayed amazing power by destroying Egypt and you can imagine how scared they must have been. On the other hand, their fright should have been tempered by realizing that the care God had shown them in preserving them and in safely shepherding them out of Egypt was only to their benefit. Why would that suddenly change? Moses had already told them Yahweh was going to appear to them in this cloud although he didn't give the specifics of just how awesome that appearance was going to be. They had also been told they were being appointed by God to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and they had agreed to do it. They probably shouldn't have been as frightened as they ap-

parently were but that's easy for me to say 3,500 years later with a lot more knowledge about Yahweh than they had at the time. Again, I don't want to be too hard on them for these kinds of issues; their fright was understandable.

Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. We all know what thunder is but the word used here is קול and it means voice or sound; it is used to refer to God's voice in Job 37:2 and 40:9. It can mean thunder but that use is less when compared to meaning voice or sound. A number of translations do not interpret it "thunder" in this verse, they interpret it "voice" (KJV, NKJV, ASV, NET, *The Complete Jewish Bible*). Voice is the better translation, but it isn't unreasonable to compare the audible voice of God to thunder. In other words, His voice when audibly speaking has the characteristics of thunder yet it remains audible speech.

Job 37:2 ²"Listen closely to the thunder [רָגַז] of His voice [קוֹל], And the rumbling that goes out from His mouth.

Job 40:9 ⁹"Or do you have an arm like God, And can you thunder [רָעַם] with a voice [קוֹל] like His?

There are three other words used in the Hebrew to specifically refer to thunder and they are רָגַז, תְּשׁוּעָה, and רָעַם two of which were used in these verses in Job and the third was used in Job 36:29. "Voice" is the better choice in Exodus 19:19 in terms of the context. I'm not saying "thunder" is incorrect, the TANKH uses it in this verse, and קול is properly translated "thunder" in Exodus 19:16 and ten other places, but in this verse, it's not quite as good a choice as "voice." רָעַם

is used fourteen times to mean thunder and the other two, רָגַז and תְּשֻׁעָה, only once each for a total of twenty-seven interpretations resulting in “thunder.”

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses confirmed that it was God's voice they were hearing on that day at the foot of the mountain.

Deuteronomy 4:12 ¹²“Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form—only a voice [קוֹל].”

The Lord descending on the mountain in fire is simply a way to relate what is happening to human speech and understanding. He appeared as fire, but as the omnipresent God, He was already there. This was the way He revealed His presence to the people assembled below.

God called Moses to the top of the mountain to meet with Him there. This seems to confirm that God was actually speaking to Moses. As far as I know, Moses would not have been able to understand thunder in terms of a cognitive ability to receive an audible message from it, but he would have understood speech that had the characteristics of thunder. That's not denying that thunder could be used as a sign at times, but that's not the issue here. Here, it is God's audible voice displaying the characteristics of thunder.

Exodus 19:20–23 ²⁰The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. ²¹Then the LORD spoke to Moses, “Go down, warn the people, so that they do not break through to the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. ²²“Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, or else the LORD will break out against them.” ²³Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us, saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.’”

Moses was told to go back and warn the people about trespassing beyond the boundary that had been set. Why this needed to be done is not known. Perhaps since the time had come for Yahweh to meet with Moses it was necessary for the people to remain in their proper place. Another consideration could have been the result of the disobedience the Israelites displayed earlier by attempting to gather manna on the Sabbath; therefore, Yahweh wanted His command not to go up the mountain reinforced. Curiosity could have gotten the better of some of them and it wasn't God's desire that any of them perish.

What was meant by priests? The Aaronic priesthood had yet to be established; they received their call in Exodus 23:1. In verse 6, they were told they would be a kingdom of priests, but that was in the future and it was a national priesthood not an individual one. It could be a reference to the firstborn sons who were sanctified to the Lord (Ex. 13:2) which is probably the best option. In Patriarchal times, fathers were the priests of the family. Since there is no record of anyone acting as a priest among the Israelites outside of this reference prior to the Aaronic priesthood, the real meaning is unknown.

Yahweh sent Moses back down the mountain.

Exodus 19:24–25 ²⁴Then the LORD said to him, "Go down and come up *again*, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, or He will break forth upon them." ²⁵So Moses went down to the people and told them.

Deuteronomy 4:10-13 reveals to us that Yahweh spoke directly to the people when giving them the Ten Commandments.

Deuteronomy 4:10–13 ¹⁰“Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when the LORD said to me, ‘Assemble the people to Me, that I may let them hear My words so they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.’ ¹¹“You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the very heart of the heavens: darkness, cloud and thick gloom. ¹²“Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form—only a voice. ¹³“So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, *that is*, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone.

Moses repeated the fact they heard the Lord speak the words of the Ten Commandments to them while he acted as the intermediary between God and the Israelites.

Deuteronomy 5:4–5 ⁴“The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire, ⁵*while* I was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain. He said,

Apparently, Aaron stood with his brother while the Ten Commandments were being proclaimed. They must have gone back up the mountain to some point between Yahweh and the Israelites.