The Book of *Exodus* begins where Genesis left off, describing the changed conditions faced by Jacob's descendants in Egypt. These descendants are now known as the *Israelites*. Trouble is on the horizon:

> Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor... But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

*Exodus 1:8-12 [RSV]*

The great themes of Exodus—oppression, exile, liberation, and the journey home—reverberate among people throughout the world. Scholar Michael Walzer called Exodus a “classic narrative, with a beginning, a middle, and an end: problem, struggle, resolution—Egypt, the wilderness, the Promised Land.” In contrast to many other ancient epics, which are mostly odysseys of adventure and return home, Exodus is a “march toward a goal, a moral progress, a transformation.” In the Israelites’ march, many have read a message of hope. As Walzer phrased it, “What is promised is radically different from what is: the end is nothing like the beginning. In the literature of the ancient world only the Aeneid resembles the Exodus in its narrative structure, describing a divinely guided and world-historical journey to something like the Promised Land.” The journey from Egypt to Canaan is the journey from bondage to the Promised Land.

Moses and the Israelites’ delivery from bondage has been retold and remembered not only by the Israelites’ descendants in the Jewish faith but by people struggling for freedom in many times and places.

American revolutionaries saw America as “God’s new Israel” and attacked King George III as a "British Pharaoh." The slaves and abolitionists of America before the Civil War and the millions who

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Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), perhaps the most influential French painter of the seventeenth century, gave great drama to the event in his *Pharaoh’s Daughter Finds Baby Moses*.
suffered imprisonment, torture, and death under the rule of twentieth-century Nazi and Soviet regimes described their conditions in Exodus terms. The Mormons’ trek across the country in search of religious freedom in Utah was couched in Exodus language. In more than one case, both sides of a conflict have seen themselves in the role of the Israelites. American writer and reporter Lincoln Steffens’s 1926 defense of Leninist (Communist) politics was called “Moses in Red.” In South Africa, for example, the Boer nationalists who fought British rule took inspiration from Exodus, which also inspired black nationalists fighting the apartheid regime of the Boers’ successors.

Moses

Moses emerged as one of the Israelites’ greatest leaders and prophets. But he first appeared as a helpless baby under a ruler’s death sentence to all male children. Pharaoh gave orders to the Egyptians: “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile.”

To save him, Moses’s mother placed the 3-month-old baby in a basket among the reeds of the river. His sister stood watch to see what would happen: Would Moses live or die? A daughter of the great Pharaoh drew Moses up from the river and took pity on him. Moses’s alert sister, Miriam, immediately volunteered to get a Hebrew woman—Moses’s own mother—to nurse the child. And so Moses, who would lead his people out of 400 years of slavery, began with the best of both worlds: his mother’s loving care and a royal home. (Read Exodus 2:2–10.)

As a young man, although he had been raised as an Egyptian, Moses went out among his own people. He saw an Egyptian (perhaps an overseer) beating a Hebrew slave. Moses carefully looked around. Was he trying to be sure no one was watching, or was he hoping that some other Israelite would be brave enough to interfere? Seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid the body. But the next day, when Moses tried to break up a fight between two Israelites, he was shocked to discover they already knew about the dead Egyptian. Who else would find out? Would he be punished?

Fearing Pharaoh’s wrath, Moses fled Egypt for the surrounding wilderness. Sitting by a well, Moses noticed that seven young women who turned out to be daughters of the priest of Midian (a man named Jethro) were being bullied by shepherds as the priest’s daughters attempted to water their father’s flock. Moses not only drove the bullies off, but (as the daughters reported to their father) he “even drew water for us and watered the flock.” Jethro gave Moses a hero’s reception and welcomed him into his family. He even offered him his daughter Zipporah in marriage. (Read Exodus 2:11–21.)

Moses went from being a prince of Egypt to herding the sheep of Midian. But according to Exodus, God had more strange turns in store for Moses.

The Burning Bush

Like Abraham before him, Moses received a call from God. Near Horeb, the “mountain of God,” an angel appeared to him in a flame of fire: “the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.” Amazed, Moses turned aside to investigate. And then it happened; God called to him by name: “Moses, Moses!” Moses responded, “Here I am.” God instructed him to remove his sandals, out of respect for holy ground. And then God identified himself: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”
The word *exodus* is from the Greek and means literally “the road out.” It is now used to describe any mass departure or emigration—from former slave Frederick Douglass’s 1880 essay “The Negro Exodus from the Gulf States” to the latest news story about a “mass exodus” of refugees.

The land that was to be the destination for Moses and the Israelites was referred to as a *land of milk and honey*. That phrase is now a common term for any vision of Utopia or for any situation in which the living is easy. For example, “When Betty got the new job, she thought she was in the land of milk and honey.”

God said to Moses: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt... Indeed, I know their sufferings, and have come to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a *land flowing with milk and honey* (Exodus 3:1–8 [NRSV]).

God then told Moses to speak God’s truth to Pharaoh’s power. This call made Moses one of the great *prophets* of the Hebrew Scriptures. The word *prophet* means “one who speaks for God.” When Moses complained that he was such a weak speaker that he would be unable to persuade Pharaoh, God reassured him that “I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet” (Exodus 7:1 [NRSV]).

But why should the Israelites have accepted Moses as their leader? Moses asked for God’s own name as proof to the Israelites that his mission had divine authority.

God’s answer is still a deep mystery. The Jewish translation into English preserves the Hebrew wording for the name of God:

Moses said to God, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” He continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’” And God said further to Moses, “Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you:

This shall be My name forever,
This My appellation for all eternity.

*Exodus 3:13–15 [NJP]*

God’s name is not a noun but a verb (EHYEH): “I am that I am” or “I will be what I will be.” What does that mean? One common interpretation is that humans cannot know the essence of God. Men and women understand God only by actions and attributes. Remember, Jewish tradition forbids speaking God’s divine name, which is denoted in the Bible as YHVH.

Like Abraham, Moses tried to negotiate with God. He offered many reasons why he might not have been the best choice to approach Pharaoh on behalf of the oppressed Israelites.
American History

Songs known as Negro spirituals grew out of the experience of slaves in the American South. Meeting in small groups, often secretly, slaves set the Bible to music with such rhythms and emotional power that it has influenced every subsequent trend in American popular music, from folk to jazz to rock, from blues to country to hip-hop.

No biblical account had more impact on the development of African American Christianity than the Book of Exodus. The call-and-response song “Go Down, Moses” is one of the best-known Negro spirituals. Call-and-response is still a characteristic of African American worship. The refrain “Let My people go!” has moved generations of human rights activists.

When Israel was in Egypt’s land
(“Let My people go!”)
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
(“Let My people go!”)

[Chorus] Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land
Tell ol’ Pharaoh to let my people go!

Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said
(“Let My people go!”)
If not I’ll smite your firstborn dead
(“Let My people go!”)
No more shall they in bondage toil
(“Let My people go!”)
Let them come out with Egypt’s spoil
(“Let My people go!”)
We need not always weep and mourn
(“Let My people go!”)
And wear these slavery chains forlorn
(“Let My people go!”)
Your foes shall not forever stand
(“Let My people go!”)
You shall possess your own good land
(“Let My people go!”)
O let us all from bondage flee
(“Let My people go!”)
And soon may all the earth be free
(“Let My people go!”)

From Rise Up Singing: The Group Singing Songbook

Pharaoh’s Hardened Heart

As the narrative progresses, God gave Moses various miraculous signs to persuade Pharaoh. But God warned Moses, “I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.” A hard-hearted man is one who does not allow his softer, warmer emotions to affect his actions; he is not open to compassion, love, or wonder.

Moses and Aaron obediently went to Pharaoh and gave him the Lord’s message: “Let my people go.” Pharaoh was dismissive: “Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go.” (Read Exodus 4:21, 5:1–2.)

And so began the ten plagues of Egypt: rivers ran with blood, frogs infested the land, gnats swarmed over Egypt. At first the magicians of Pharaoh’s court were able to match plague for plague. But according to Exodus, when all the dust of the earth was turned to gnats in the third plague, the magicians threw in the towel and told Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God!” (Exodus 8:19 [NRSV]). And the plagues continued; after the gnats, flies swarmed, a deadly disease struck the Egyptians’ livestock, festering boils tortured people and animals alike, huge clumps of hail killed beasts and people, locusts devoured the crops the hail
The tenth and final plague is a gruesome one. To get the impact of the tenth plague, read Exodus 12. Let these questions guide your reading:

- What was the tenth plague?
- How were the Israelites to prepare for it?
- When did the plague strike?
- What instructions did God give the Israelites?
- What were the results of the plague?

The Passover

What could possibly have changed the hard heart of Pharaoh? According to the text, God had one final, terrible plague in store for the Egyptians and Pharaoh. God told Moses that after this last plague, Pharaoh “will let you go from here.” In fact, “he will drive you away” (Exodus 11:1 [NRSV]).

Along with the instructions Israelites were given to protect themselves from the tenth plague, the Israelites were given a command: “You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. . . . And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ you shall say, ‘It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses” (Exodus 12:24–27 [NRSV]). Today, Jews around the world continue to commemorate the passage out of Egypt with the yearly festival of Pesach, or Passover. Each family celebrates Pesach with a memorial meal known as a Seder. Symbolic foods recall the Israelites’ sufferings in slavery and the lamb with whose blood they marked their doorways. No leavening or yeast is used in food eaten during this holiday. At a key point of the meal, the youngest child in the family asks, “Why is this night different from all others?” The assembled group answers,
Because we were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Eternal, our God, brought us forth thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

The memorial meal of Pesach has entered the Christian tradition, too, because the New Testament describes the last supper of Jesus and his disciples, before Jesus' crucifixion, as a Passover meal.

Parting the Red Sea

As the Israelites left Egypt, God's presence accompanied them in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. But they were not gone even a day when Pharaoh's heart unexpectedly hardened again. He sent troops, horses, and chariots after the departing Israelites to drag them back into captivity. The Israelites complained to Moses that they had been better off working and eating in Egypt than being hunted and killed by Pharaoh's army.

The Israelites seemed to be trapped. They were stranded on the banks of a body of water, traditionally called the Red Sea. (An alternative translation is the “Sea of Reeds.”) With impassable waters before them and the furious Egyptians at their backs, the Israelites appeared doomed. But once more, according to Exodus, God intervened.

But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Exodus 14:13–14, 21–22 [NRSV]

The rich architectural detail and epic proportions of painter David Roberts's The Departure of the Israelites inspired the set designs and the direction of the corresponding scene in Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 film, The Ten Commandments.
Safe on the other side, the Israelites watched as the water returned and devoured Pharaoh’s pursuing army. Then Moses and the Israelite men burst forth in a song of praise and thanksgiving:

I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation.

Exodus 15:1 [KJV]

Moses’ sister, the prophet Miriam, picked up a tambourine and led all the women of Israel in a victory dance, also singing the refrain from what has come to be known as the “Song of the Sea.” They celebrated God’s defeat of the Egyptian military just when the people of Israel faced seemingly insurmountable odds.

The Israelites’ unabashed joy that God destroyed Israel’s enemies may sit uneasily on modern ears. But the God portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures does not hesitate to take sides, condemning those who refuse to cooperate with God’s plan. In the Jewish tradition, the Hebrew experience as slaves in Egypt forms the basis of a sense of justice that calls for special and merciful treatment of strangers, the poor, and the oppressed.
The Prophet Miriam

Moses' sister Miriam plays a very important part in the life of Moses and in the Exodus account. She is one of the very few women who are accorded the title prophet. She was with Moses from the beginning and, along with their older brother Aaron, she provided the complete description of just who Moses was and is. An enjoyable literary exercise is to read through the Exodus account, trying to see the events through Miriam's eyes.

Here are some statistics that reinforce the importance of Miriam:

- People mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible: 1,426
- The number of women named: 111
- Women in Hebrew Bible who have the title prophet: 5
- Women in the Christian Scriptures with the title prophet: 1
- The female prophets by name and where they are given the title:
  - Miriam (Exodus 15:21)
  - Deborah (Judges 4:4)
  - Huldah (2 Kings 22:13; 2 Chronicles 34:22)
  - Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3)
  - Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14)
  - Anna (Luke 2:36)

In this stained glass window by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses, leads the Israelite women in a dance of victory after the escape from Egypt.

projects

Choose one of these projects:

1. Research, prepare, and present a report on the significance of Moses both as a biblical figure and as a symbol. Include information on historical figures who have been compared to Moses.

2. Develop a creative presentation of the themes of liberation and deliverance expressed in the Exodus narrative. Feel free to choose poetry, song, painting, dance, or a play as your medium. Make your creation as contemporary as you can.

3. Read the Song of Moses in Exodus 32:1–43. Write a report on what you read. Remember that this Moses who shows himself to be both a poet and a musician was self-described as slow of speech.