

# How Moses Shaped America

From the Revolution to the Cold War, the Old Testament hero has been the country's defining religious symbol. What we can learn from Moses today

BY BRUCE FEILER

"WE ARE IN THE PRESENCE OF A LOT OF Moseses," Barack Obama said on March 4, 2007, three weeks after announcing his candidacy for President. He was speaking in Selma, Ala., surrounded by civil rights pioneers. Obama cast his run for the White House as a fulfillment of the Moses tradition of leading people out of bondage into freedom. "I thank the Moses generation, but we've got to remember that Joshua still had a job to do. As great as Moses was ... he didn't cross over the river to see the promised land."

Eight months into his presidency, Obama might want to give Moses a second look. On issues from health care to Afghanistan, the President faces doubts and rebellions, from an entrenched pharaonic establishment on one hand and restless, stiff-necked followers on the other. There's good reason, then, for Obama to heed the leadership lessons of history's greatest leader. Like presidential predecessors from Washington to Reagan, Obama can use the Moses story to help guide Americans in troubled times. From the Pilgrims to the Founding Fathers, the Civil War to the civil rights movement, Americans have turned to Moses in periods of crisis because his narrative offers a road map of peril and promise.

## Plight of the Pilgrims

THE MOSES STORY OPENS IN THE 13TH century B.C.E. with the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. After the pharaoh orders the slaughter of all Israelite male babies, Moses is floated down the Nile, picked

up by the pharaoh's daughter and raised in the palace. An adult Moses murders an Egyptian for beating "one of his kinsmen," then flees to the desert, where a voice in a burning bush recruits him to free the Israelites. This moment represents Moses' first leadership test: Will he cling to his unburdened life or attempt to free a people enslaved for centuries?

The plight of the Israelites resonated with the earliest American settlers. For centuries, the Catholic Church had banned the direct reading of Scripture. But the Protestant Reformation, combined with the printing press, brought vernacular Bibles to everyday readers. What Protestants discovered was a narrative that resonated with their sense of subjugation by the church and appealed to their dreams of a utopian New World. The Pilgrims stressed this aspect of Moses. When the band of Protestant breakaways left England in 1620, they described themselves as the chosen people fleeing their pharaoh, King James. On the Atlantic, they proclaimed their journey to be as vital as "Moses and the Israelites when they went out of Egypt." And when they got to Cape Cod, they thanked God for letting them pass through their fiery Red Sea.

By the time of the Revolution, the theme of beleaguered people standing up to a superpower had become the go-to narrative of American identity. The two best-selling books of 1776 featured Moses. Thomas Paine, in *Common Sense*, called King George the "hardened, sullen tempered pharaoh." Samuel Sherwood, in *The*

*Church's Flight into the Wilderness*, said God would deliver the colonies from Egyptian bondage. The Moses image was so pervasive that on July 4, after signing the Declaration of Independence, the Congress asked Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to propose a seal for the United States. Their recommendation: Moses, leading the Israelites across the Red Sea. In their eyes, Moses was America's true Founding Father.

But escaping bondage proved to be only half the story. After the Israelites arrive in the desert, they face a period a lawlessness, which prompts the Ten Commandments. Only by rallying around the new order can the people become a nation. Freedom depends on law.

Americans faced a similar moment of chaos after the Revolution. One Connecticut preacher noted that Moses took 40 years to quell the Israelites' grumbling: "Now we are acting the same stupid part." And so just as a reluctant Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, then handed down the Ten Commandments, a reluctant George Washington led the colonists to victory, then presided over the drafting of the Constitution. The parallel was not lost. Two-thirds of the eulogies at Washington's death compared the "first conductor of the Jewish nation" to the "leader and father of the American nation."

## Let My People Go

WHILE MOSES WAS A UNIFYING PRESENCE during the founding era, a generation later he got dragged into the issue that most divided the country. The Israelites'



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**American Prophet** **1** The Ten Commandments taught Israelites that freedom depends on law **2** Founding Father Washington was compared to Moses **3** The national seal depicts the parting of the Red Sea **4** Heston updated Moses for the Cold War **5** The Statue of Liberty features Moses icons **6** Tubman, the Moses of her people



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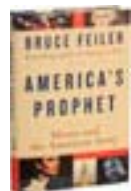
escape from slavery was the dominant motif of black-slave spirituals, including "Turn Back Pharaoh's Army," "I Am Bound for the Promised Land" and the most famous, "Go Down, Moses," which was called the national anthem of slaves: "When Israel was in Egypt Land,/ Let my people go;/ Oppressed so hard they could not stand,/ Let my people go."

Spirituals sent coded messages. As Frederick Douglass wrote, when he and his comrades sang, "O Canaan, sweet Canaan,/ I am bound for the land of Canaan," overseers believed they were "worshipping the white god." But to them, it meant they were about to escape on the Underground Railroad. The movement's famous conductor, Harriet Tubman, was called the Moses of her people.

And yet even as abolitionists used the Exodus to attack slavery, Southerners used it to defend the institution. The War Between the States became the War Between the Moseses. Slaveholders cited a bevy of biblical passages—Abraham acquires slaves; Moses invites slaves to the first Passover; Jesus does nothing to free slaves—to claim the Bible endorsed slavery. The book that joined Americans together was torn asunder by slavery.

It took America's most Bible-quoting President to reunite the country. Called a pharaoh by his opponents, Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves after a "vow with God"; he invoked the Exodus at Gettysburg. When he died, Lincoln, like Washington before him, was compared to Moses. "There is no historic figure more noble than that of the Jewish lawgiver," Henry Ward Beecher eulogized. "There is scarcely another event in history more touching than his death. Until now. Again a great leader of the people has passed through toil, sorrow, battle, and war, and come near to the promised land of peace, into which he might not pass over."

Lincoln's assassination initiated an even more long-lasting tribute to Moses, the Statue of Liberty, given to America by the French to honor the slain President. The sculptor, Frédéric Bartholdi, chose the goddess of liberty as his model, but he enhanced her with two icons from Moses: the nimbus of light around her head and the tablet in her arms, both from the moment Moses descends Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments. The message: Freedom comes with law.



*Feiler is the author of America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story, from which this article is adapted*

## The Bible outlines a dozen rebellions against Moses. In a parallel to Obama, the Israelites even question his birthright: 'Who made you leader over us?'

### Moses and Superman

WITH THE RISE OF SECULARISM AND THE declining influence of the Bible in the 20th century, Moses might have melted away as a role model. But something curious happened. He was so identified as a hero of the American Dream that he superseded Scripture and entered the realm of popular culture, from poetry to television.

Superman was modeled partly on Moses. The comic-book hero's creators, two bookish Jews from Cleveland named Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, drew their character's backstory from the superhero of the Torah. Just as baby Moses is floated down the Nile in a small basket to escape annihilation, baby Superman is launched into space in a small rocket ship to avoid extinction. Just as Moses is raised in an alien world before being summoned to liberate Israel, Superman is raised in an alien environment before being called to assist humanity.

But it was Cecil B. DeMille who turned Moses into a symbol of American power in the Cold War. The 1956 epic *The Ten Commandments*, the fifth highest grossing movie of all time, opened with DeMille appearing onscreen. "The theme of this picture is whether men ought to be ruled by God's law or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator," he said. "The same battles continues throughout the world today." To drive home his point, DeMille cast mostly Americans as Israelites and Europeans as Egyptians. And in the film's final shot, Charlton Heston adopts the pose of the Statue of Liberty and quotes the line from the second book of Moses—Leviticus—inscribed on the Liberty Bell: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

To modern Americans, Moses' heartbreak, in many ways, ensures his ongoing appeal. Though a champion of freedom, he was also a prophet of disappointment. After leading the Israelites for 40 years, Moses is denied entry to the promised land for disobeying God and is forced to die on Mount Nebo. No one

understood this aspect of Moses better than Martin Luther King Jr. In his first national speech, in 1956, he compared the U.S. Supreme Court to Moses for splitting the Red Sea of segregation. On the night before his death 13 years later, King predicted he would not fulfill his dream. "I've been to the mountaintop," he declared. "And I've looked over. I've seen the promised land. And I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land." Both Moses and King are reminders that even the greatest leaders fall short.

SO WHAT LESSONS CAN THE CURRENT occupant of the White House learn from a figure that nearly every one of his predecessors has invoked?

First, sell the milk and honey. Obama is the first President to hold a Passover seder in the White House, but he seems to be forgetting the main point of the service: the story of Moses is, above all, a story. It's a narrative of hope. Details are fine for negotiating policy, but it's the vision of milk and honey that gets people to plunge into the Red Sea.

Second, remember the Nile. As he wrestles with whether to tackle immigration, toughen regulations or insure all Americans, the President should recall that from the moment God hears his people moaning under slavery, the entire moral focus of the Moses story is to build a society that nurtures everyone. Thirty-six times, the Torah urges the Israelites to befriend the stranger, for they were strangers in Egypt.

Third, the one on Sinai takes the heat. The Bible outlines a dozen rebellions in which the people attempt to overthrow Moses. In a striking parallel to Obama, the Israelites even question Moses' birthright. "Who made you leader over us?" God offers to destroy the people, but Moses brokers a compromise. The strongest leaders face the harshest criticism and hold fast against their naysayers.

Finally, you may not enter the promised land. Forced to die across the Jordan on Mount Nebo, Moses faces his final choice: Will he fight or prepare the Israelites for the future? He chooses the latter. "I have put before you this day life and good, death and adversity," he says. "Choose life."

These words capture what may be the most trying lesson of leadership: you may fail, but your legacy is to prepare your followers to succeed without you. So plunge into the waters, persevere through the dryness, and don't be surprised if you don't reach your goal. For the true destination is not this year at all, but next. ■