

Who is Moses?

Moses is one of the key figures and prophets in the history of [Judaism, Christianity, and Islam](#). **Moses** first appears in the Jewish Hebrew Bible as the first significant prophet of the Jewish god Yahweh and leader of Yahweh's people. The [Hebrew Bible](#) was adapted by Christians into the Christian Old Testament, so Moses becomes an important figure in Christianity later. However, Moses' origins are Jewish, so to best understand the context of Moses' story, the Hebrew Bible is the best place to start. The [Torah](#), the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, tell the story of Moses' birth, being raised by Egyptians, leading the [Israelites](#) out of slavery, and establishing the first laws and structure for the [Israelite religion](#) and society.

The Story of Moses in the Bible

The story of Moses, in summary, tells the story of a Jewish boy who is born into slavery but ends up leading the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt and onward to their new homeland. Moses' story begins in the Book of Exodus, which finds the Israelites enslaved in Egypt by a new pharaoh after they had gone to Egypt to escape famine during Joseph's story in the Book of Genesis. His story ends in the [Book of Deuteronomy](#), the last book of the Torah, with his death.

Childhood

Moses was born to Israelite parents, Amram and Jochebed, who were slaves in Egypt. Both of his parents were **Levite**, meaning they were part of the [tribe of Levi](#), the tribe later known as the tribe of the priesthood. At the time of Moses' birth, the number of Israelites in Egypt had grown immensely, and the Pharaoh was concerned they would come to overpower the Egyptians. Since the men tended to be stronger than the women, he ordered all male infants to be drowned in the Nile River in order to avoid an uprising. When Moses was born, his mother-not wanting him to be killed-placed him in a basket and set him out onto the river.

The Pharaoh's daughter eventually heard Moses crying in the basket, so she had her maid draw him out of the water. She hired an Israelite woman, who ended up being Moses' own mother, to nurse him, but the Pharaoh's daughter raised him as her own son.

Midian

Moses grew up in the Egyptian court, but the text does not give any details about Moses' childhood after his birth. When he was older, he realized how terribly his fellow Israelites were treated by the Egyptians. When he saw an Egyptian slaver beating one of the Israelites, he killed the Egyptian and hid his body. To avoid repercussions from the Pharaoh, Moses fled Egypt and went to **Midian**, a land east of Egypt on the northeastern banks of the Red Sea. In Midian, Moses met his soon-to-be wife **Zipporah**, whose father let Moses stay with them in exchange for working as a shepherd. Moses and Zipporah had two sons: Gershom and Eliezer.

During Moses' time in Midian, he encountered Yahweh in the form of a burning bush on Mount Horeb. Yahweh frequently appeared in pillars of fire in the Torah, and this story is no different. In the story, Yahweh appeared in a bush that was on fire but never burned up. This story functioned as Moses' prophetic call, and Yahweh told him he would lead the Israelites out of slavery. On the way back to Egypt with his family, Moses' brother **Aaron**, who later became the first Israelite priest, met them. According to the Book of Exodus, Moses exiled himself in Midian for 40 years before returning to Egypt.

Exodus

Upon his return to Egypt, Moses went to the Pharaoh to tell him to let the Israelites go, as Yahweh had commanded. However, Yahweh would "harden Pharaoh's heart" so he could not release them (Exodus 7:3, NRSV), seemingly as a way to demonstrate Yahweh's power. Because of this, there were ten plagues sent to Egypt sequentially in an effort to convince the Pharaoh to release the Israelites. The plagues included events such as the Nile River turning to blood, the killing all of the Egyptians' livestock, and the appearance of locusts that devoured Egyptian plants. The final plague was the killing of all firstborn sons. The Israelites protected themselves from this by spreading lamb's blood on their doorways to ensure they were passed over; lamb's blood was known as a symbol of sacrifice and acted as a marker to let the Angel of Death know not to stop there. The Pharaoh's son was killed during this plague, so he finally decided to release the Israelites.

However, as they left, the Pharaoh changed his mind and decided to pursue them. The Pharaoh brought his army of chariots to pursue the Israelites as they walked on foot through the wilderness, already starting to regret leaving Egypt. When they reached the Red Sea, Yahweh commanded Moses to reach his hand over the waters to part the sea so the Israelites could walk through, then release the waters to drown the Egyptians who were pursuing them. This event was referred to as the **Exodus**, literally meaning the "exit," from Egypt.

Mount Sinai

Moses was tasked with leading the Israelites to the "Promised Land" Yahweh had promised them: the land of Israel. For decades, the Israelites journeyed toward Israel and encountered many hardships, which Moses, enabled by Yahweh, remedied with miracles like getting water from a rock and providing bread from heaven. During their journey, they stopped at **Mount Sinai**, a mountain located on the southern Sinai Peninsula. At Mount Sinai, Moses:

- Received the [Ten Commandments](#), or decalogue, with laws Yahweh had given the Israelites
- Established a **covenant**, which is a promise or contract, with Yahweh
- Punished the Israelites for making a [golden calf](#) while they were waiting for Moses to descend from the mountain
- Established the priesthood, the group of Israelite religious leaders, through Aaron's lineage
- Built the **Tabernacle**, the moveable tent that housed the [Ark of the Covenant](#) and the presence of Yahweh.

After leaving Mount Sinai, the Israelites continued their grueling journey towards Israel. Along the way, the Israelites were continually upset by the lack of food and water and the difficulties they faced. Yahweh told Moses to speak to a rock for water to flow from it, but instead, Moses disobeyed and struck the rock twice in frustration. Though water still flowed from the rock, Moses was told he would no longer be allowed to take the Israelites into Israel. While Moses later gets to see Israel from a mountain, he passes leadership of the group to Joshua. The Book of Deuteronomy functions as Moses' farewell address before he dies at the age of 120.