

## Go down, Moses

Louis Armstrong

### *Chorus:*

Go down Moses  
Way down in Egypt land  
Tell all Pharaohs to  
Let My People Go!

### *Armstrong:*

When Israel was in Egypt land...  
(Let My People Go!)

Oppressed so hard they could not stand...  
(Let My People Go!)

So the God seyeth: 'Go down, Moses  
Way down in Egypt land  
Tell all Pharaohs to  
Let My People Go!'

So Moses went to Egypt land...  
(Let My People Go!)

He made all Pharaohs understand...  
(Let My People Go!)

Yes The Lord said 'Go down, Moses  
Way down in Egypt land  
Tell all Pharaohs to  
Let My People Go!'

Thus spoke the Lord, bold Moses said:  
(Let My People Go!)  
'If not I'll smite your firstborns dead'  
(Let My People Go!)

God-The Lord said 'Go down, Moses  
Way down in Egypt land  
Tell all Pharaohs to  
Let My People Go!'

Tell all Pharaohs  
To Let My People Go

## Go down, Moses

Louis Armstrong

### *Chorus:*

Go down Moses  
Way down in Egypt land  
Tell all Pharaohs to  
Let My People Go!

### *Armstrong:*

When Israel was in Egypt land...  
(Let My People Go!)

Oppressed so hard they could not stand...  
(Let My People Go!)

So the God seyeth: 'Go down, Moses  
Way down in Egypt land  
Tell all Pharaohs to  
Let My People Go!'

So Moses went to Egypt land...  
(Let My People Go!)

He made all Pharaohs understand...  
(Let My People Go!)

Yes The Lord said 'Go down, Moses  
Way down in Egypt land  
Tell all Pharaohs to  
Let My People Go!'

Thus spoke the Lord, bold Moses said:  
(Let My People Go!)  
'If not I'll smite your firstborns dead'  
(Let My People Go!)

God-The Lord said 'Go down, Moses  
Way down in Egypt land  
Tell all Pharaohs to  
Let My People Go!'

Tell all Pharaohs  
To Let My People Go

# ***God down, Moses: poem summary and analysis***

---

## **Lines 1–2**

The opening lines tell Moses, leader of the Jews who were held as slaves by the Egyptians, to go deep into Egypt, the land of the oppressors. In the Old Testament book of Exodus, God chooses Moses to lead his people out of slavery. In this song, Egypt may stand for the “slave states” in the American South. This assumption is reinforced by use of the word “down” since slave-holding states were referred to as being “down south.” In this interpretation, Moses would be thought of as an abolitionist, one who helps slaves escape from the South, or as a political leader who fights for the abolition of slavery altogether.

## **Lines 3–4**

The lyrics instruct Moses to speak to the Egyptian Pharaoh, demanding freedom for the Jews. In Exodus God commanded Moses to say “Let my people go” to the Pharaoh. God also told Moses to warn the Pharaoh ten times of ten different plagues that were sent by God to force the Egyptians to grant the Jews freedom. Because the Pharaoh failed to release the Jews from slavery after each plague except the last, Moses had to return to him repeatedly with the message, “Let my people go.” In this first stanza, the assonance of long o and the o sounds ow and oo that occur in the words “go,” “Moses,” “ole,” “Pharaoh,” “down,” and “to” creates a sustained melodic effect.

## **Lines 5–8**

Lines five and seven elaborate on the story of Moses by describing the condition of the Jews. “Israel” refers to the Jews who are destined to live in the promised land of Israel, but are instead being kept as slaves by the Egyptian Pharaoh. They are oppressed, that is, burdened, to such an extent that they cannot stand, a condition that implies more than literally being on the point of collapse; it may also refer to the inability to stand up for one’s rights. Both the physical exhaustion and political subjection of the Jews reflect the conditions of African-American slaves. Forced to work from daybreak to sunset, underfed, and physically brutalized, slaves often found themselves physically unable to stand. If they tried to stand up for their rights, their actions were punished by whipping and sometimes by death. In addition to the description of the condition of the slaves, this stanza contains two repetitions of the chorus “Let my people go,” which creates the effect of a determined group of voices united in the struggle for freedom.

## **Lines 9–10**

Each time he warned the Egyptians that they would suffer at the hands of God, Moses always said that he spoke the words of the Lord as God told him to do. Although Moses could have easily been put to death by the Pharaoh, he went as God’s messenger and identified himself each time as speaking God’s will. This took great courage, since he was addressing the Pharaoh, who was not only the most powerful man in Egypt, but who was also considered a god himself. Furthermore, the Egyptians did not include Moses’s God among the other deities that they worshipped besides the Pharaoh. Therefore, Moses would be considered extraordinarily rebellious by the Pharaoh. In light of this, the song rightly calls Moses “bold.” If the song is taken to be a metaphor for the African Americans quest for freedom, then the reference to a “bold Moses” reminds the listener that African-American slaves also needed great courage to escape from their captivity. If a slave were caught trying to escape or helping others escape, the punishment frequently was death. Line twelve repeats the chorus, creating a further feeling of brave rebellion.

## **Lines 11–12**

Line eleven refers to the last plague sent by God to free the Jews. After nine attempts to convince the Pharaoh to free the Jewish slaves, God told Moses to warn the Pharaoh that every first-born child in Egypt would be killed as a sign of God’s power and his displeasure that his chosen people were in

bondage. When this plague causes the death of every first-born Egyptian child, including the Pharaoh's son, the Pharaoh grants the Jews their freedom. The Pharaoh would not relent until he had suffered drastic punishment. Reference to this extreme measure may be read as a strong threat that slavery in America would not be tolerated forever; with the help of abolitionists, slavery would end, even if bloodshed were necessary to bring about justice. In the concluding chorus, "Let my people go," the forceful demand for freedom again rings out.

## **Freedom**

"Go Down, Moses," a spiritual with its origins in the slave community of the southern United States, adopts the Biblical story of Moses from the book of Exodus to express the unquenchable desire for freedom felt by the African Americans held in captivity. Any study of the body of spirituals will reveal that this hunger is the clear and overriding theme of the genre. In his detailed study of the origins and meanings of the African-American spirituals, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*, John Lovell, Jr. states that "There is hardly a better way to nail down the Afro-American spiritual than to describe the central passion of it and its creators—a thing called freedom."

---

## **Negro spirituals overview**

The story of Negro spirituals begins with twelve to fifteen million Africans being deported by European merchants. Men and women are then sold as slaves to Americans, mostly plantation owners.

Forced to work in the fields and forbidden to talk with one another, slaves practice work songs, simple songs made of shouts (short and striking sentences) with no music. They represent a solitary expression of melancholy, suffering and despair, addressed to gods or spirits sought out to help in a dreadful situation in an unfamiliar place.

Slaves were quickly evangelized, to teach them resignation (main message of Christ: accept your fate and be rewarded in the next life) and guarantee a peaceful workforce. They started speaking in English and integrating references to the Bible in their songs with an overwhelming religious vocabulary. They sing of Moses, Exodus and Christ. They identify with the Hebrews, oppressed by the Egyptians then freed by Moses, and wait for their own liberator.

Little by little, they add music to their songs. First, using their tools: axes, hammers, pickaxes... Then playing instruments (drums, flutes made of reed, violins) in secret, when the foreman has retired for the night. The work songs turn into negro spirituals, chants mingling African tradition and European religious music, sung a capella by a group of people, first during secret ceremonies in the woods, then in black churches. They were composed and written anonymously and are mostly about freedom, home and family. Negro spirituals, that gave birth to Gospel, then blues, are considered to be the first form of resistance by black slaves. Indeed, the themes of liberation and hope are in themselves religious, plus it's a way of creating a new culture that excludes the white masters and prove that the slaves are people, not animals or property.

## TS3 - 4

Slaves were quickly evangelized, to teach them **resignation** (main message of Christ: accept your fate (destiny) and be rewarded in the next life) and guarantee a **peaceful workforce**. They started speaking in English and integrating references to the Bible in their songs with an overwhelming religious vocabulary. They sing of Moses, Exodus and Christ. They identify with the Hebrews, **oppressed** by the Egyptians then **freed** by Moses, and wait for their own **liberator**.