



I will send thee (Moses) unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt. And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain. And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. (Ex 3:10-14)

Moses has received his marching orders from God – simple, succinct, and exact. Moses is working as an exile of Egypt in the fields of Jethro as a herdsman. But God has commanded him to perform a duty that would seem impossible to anyone less than a courageously faithful man of God. “Leave your flocks, Moses, and go DOWN into that sinful land of Egypt (where you are wanted for murder of an Egyptian taskmaster), go up to the most powerful king on earth and tell him, in no uncertain terms, to let the people of God GO!” Ok, simple is it not? The challenge is in the doing!

The old negro spiritual that we study today is born out of the hot sweat of oppression of a great people in the fields of the South and elsewhere. It is more correctly named, “Go Down, Moses!” but I have chosen the alternate title for ease of filing. The lyrics, as well as the tune, are not written by a man, but by a people whose heavy burdens and daily labors in the heat of the sun drove home their great need of a redeemer and liberator. Egypt has a symbolic meaning in Scripture of sin and bondage. Its direction in the Bible is always referred to as DOWN. It is compared, in immorality, to Sodom and Jerusalem (at the crucifixion of Christ.) *“And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them. And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.”* (Rev 11:7-8) In the context of American slavery, this ancient sense of “down” converged with the concept of “down the river” (the [Mississippi](#)), where slaves' conditions were notoriously worse, a situation which left the idiom “sell [someone] down the river” in present-day English.

Like many other classic negro spirituals, this song is designed to be sung antiphonally for best results. The slaves in the fields had a leader who would chant the

first line, and the people would respond with the second. It is a very moving experience to hear this great old spiritual sung in the spirit of its creators. The predicament of the slaves of old are quite parallel to those of the Children of Israel in bondage in Egypt only, this was DOWN SOUTH to them.

Go Down Moses

When Israel was in Egypt's land
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go

Refrain:
Go down Moses
Way down in Egypt's land
Tell old Pharaoh
Let my people go

Thus spoke the Lord, Bold Moses said
Let my people go
If not I'll smite your first born dead
Let my people go

Refrain

No more shall they in bondage toil
Let my people go
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil
Let my people go

Refrain

The Lord told Moses what to do
Let my people go
To lead the children of Israel through
Let my people go

Refrain

Reading from the early chapters of Exodus, we find that a new king had arisen in Egypt who "*knew not Joseph.*" He probably did not care to know, or remember, a Hebrew who had done much to alleviate the dreadful consequences of famine for the people of Egypt and all others of the region. He placed the Children of Israel in hard bondage. More than to exact a result from their labors was the desire to suppress and discourage the race from advancing. "*When Israel was in Egypt's land, Let my people go. Oppressed so hard they could not stand, Let my people go.*" Frankly, I have not been able to rid these lyrics and this tune from my mind since I first decided to write about it some few weeks ago. My wife says I am driving her crazy by my constant singing of it. It is filled with heart and passion. The opening stanza introduces the terms for the song itself. Israel was, indeed, in Egypt's land. It had been the will of God to bring them there, not only to weather the famine, but also to get a taste of physical bondage to man so that they could better understand their later spiritual bondage to the Law. They were mightily oppressed and beaten as common beasts of burden in Egypt. The sub-refrain is

a lilted suggestion of God's plan to send Moses to Pharaoh – *"Let my People Go."* Israel had been in Egypt for some four hundred years since the coming of Jacob and his sons down into the land.

The next stanza is sung, again, by the leader in the field of labor: *"Go down Moses, Way down in Egypt's land. Tell old Pharaoh, "Let my people go."* This last phrase, "Let my people go" is a foregone conclusion once God has ruled on the matter. It simply needs the maturing of the due time of God for fulfillment. Egypt was a long way from the flocks of Jethro. It was definitely DOWN in more ways than one. It was a direction that was DOWN. It was a danger that was DOWN. It was an evil that was DOWN. And God told Moses to go down into Egypt and tell Pharaoh to *"Let His people Go."* Moses was a mighty man of faith. He was also well-learned in the law and literature of Egypt having been raised in the royal household of Pharaoh. He knew the dangers of going DOWN, but he also knew the consequences of not obeying the Mighty God. I wonder how many of our modern ministers would act with immediate dispatch if told by God to "Go to North Korea and tell the ten-horned dictator, Kim Jung Un, to *"let His people go?"* The silence would likely be deafening!

You will recall that Pharaoh had ordered the midwives of the Hebrew women to kill every male child born of the Hebrews which they did not do. Thus, Pharaoh, and his people, would suffer the first male child of every household being taken by the Angel of Death on the night of the first Passover in Egypt. *"Thus spoke the Lord, Bold Moses said, Let my people go. If not I'll smite your first born dead, Let my people go."* Whether or not an ungodly ruler heeds the voice of God is of little consequence to His Providence. The thing will come to pass even at greater and greater suffering on the part of the disobedient sovereign. *"And I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not by a mighty hand. And I will stretch out my hand, and smite Egypt with all my wonders which I will do in the midst thereof: and after that he will let you go."* (Ex 3:19-20)

"No more shall they in bondage toil, Let my people go. Let them come out with Egypt's spoil, Let my people go." The beauty of this spiritual is its literal faithfulness to the biblical account of the Children of Israel in Egypt. God instructed Moses that Israel would find favor in the eyes of the Egyptians and they should 'borrow' valuable assets from them which they would carry with them out of Egypt – a fair payment on their forced labors. *"And I will give this people favour in the sight of the Egyptians: and it shall come to pass, that, when ye go, ye shall not go empty: But every woman shall borrow of her neighbour, and of her that sojourneth in her house, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment: and ye shall put them upon your sons, and upon your daughters; and ye shall spoil the Egyptians."* (Ex 3:21-22) God leaves no stone unturned.

"The Lord told Moses what to do, Let my people go. To lead the children of Israel through, Let my people go." Moses was merely the vicegerent in leading the people out of Egypt. The One whose mighty outstretched arm to lead the people out of bondage was God Himself. *"And when we cried unto the LORD God of our fathers, the LORD heard our voice, and looked on our affliction, and our labour, and our oppression: And the LORD brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders: And he hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, even a land that floweth with milk and honey."* (Deut 26:7-9) America, and all nations, would be well-advised to remember the benefits of God's Divine Providence in bringing us into this fair country, as well.

This negro spiritual came to the public eye after being recorded in the voice of Paul Robeson. His rich, resonant voice gave power to the song. It is a reminder to all people who suffer bondage to know that the Lord is a prayer away. He has already made provision for your redemption through the blood of His dearly Beloved Son. Abandon your relics acquired in Egypt (sin) and cross over into Canaan while the cloud by day, and fire by night (Holy Ghost), is leading.