

When the founders looked to Moses

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Did Moses influence the founding of the United States? This historical question has generated controversy in Texas, where politicians, historians, and educators have recently debated whether Moses should be listed as an American founder in new social studies textbooks.

It all began in 2010, when the Texas State Board of Education said that students needed to "identify the individuals whose principles of laws and government institutions informed the American founding documents, including those of Moses." Not surprisingly, many people have taken issue with the statement, claiming that it is a blatant attempt to insert Christianity into the public education system.

The real issue here is not only about Moses; it is about the place of religion, specifically Christianity and the Bible, in American politics. On this issue the founders are notoriously difficult to pin down. It is true that the founders were cautious about inserting religion into politics. But that did not mean they ignored the Bible, even Moses in particular, in their political discussions.

It would have been difficult to ignore the Bible altogether in revolutionary America. The Bible was the most read book at the time, and almost everyone knew basic biblical teachings and stories. So it makes sense that the founders were fluent in scripture, certainly more knowledgeable about the Bible than the average American is today.

It should not be surprising, then, that the story of Moses and the Exodus was one of the most cited biblical texts in revolutionary America. In 1776, John Adams [wrote to his wife](#), Abigail, about "a Parallel between the Case of Israel and that of America." John Adams had heard this preached in a sermon, and he thought it was enlightening because it "indicated strongly the Design of Providence that We should be separated from G. Britain."

Many colonists seemed to agree that the Exodus story paralleled America's revolutionary crisis with Britain. In 1776, when Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson discussed what should be on a "Great Seal" for the new nation, they both thought of the Exodus story. As John Adams reported, Franklin wanted the seal to feature the parting of the Red Sea, with Moses raising his staff while Pharaoh and his chariots of soldiers drowned as the waters closed in on them. In contrast, Jefferson wanted another scene from the Exodus, with the Israelites led through the wilderness by a cloud in daytime and a pillar of fire at night.

Some of the founders saw themselves as politically enslaved by the British "pharaoh," King George III, and his oppressive policies. Many have pointed out the ironies here. After all, American patriots complained that the British had enslaved them while the Americans were enslaving thousands of Africans. Even so, many patriots adopted this story, viewing themselves as the new Israel, and naming George Washington the American Moses.

Political examples from the Old Testament also figured prominently in the most important pamphlet circulated during the revolutionary era, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Paine was trying to convince his fellow colonists that they did not need King George III, or any other British monarch. The British government was tyrannical, he argued, and he wanted colonists to support the patriotic cause to form a new nation based on "republican" principles in which there would be no king and the citizens would have more power. The situation was urgent. The war was raging, and still many colonists had not made up their minds about the Revolution, a new nation, and their loyalty to the king. Congress had not yet issued the Declaration of Independence. But Paine was already declaring the need for independence, and he turned to 1 Samuel 8 to make his case. [Paine asserted](#) that God did not want the people to have a king. God warned that kings would oppress them, and so they did, Paine argued. Though Paine was [skeptical about Christianity and scripture](#), he was savvy enough to know that ordinary colonists respected scripture.

Historians who have commented on the debate in Texas are correct to argue that Moses was not the primary political influence on the founders. Just because the founders cited scripture to support their political views, that did not mean that they learned these views exclusively from scripture. If the Bible had some influence on revolutionary politics, politics also influenced the way Americans read the Bible.

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