

Prince of Egypt Dreamworks: DVD: \$13.89-Amazon. Rated PG. 1 hr, 38 mins.

The Prince of Egypt is a 1998 Dreamworks animated musical drama film directed by Brenda Chapman, Steven Hickner, and Simon Wells that creatively retells the story contained in the book of Exodus. Some familiar voices of the characters in the film include Danny Glover, Sandra Bullock, and Michelle Pfeiffer. The film was so popular that it won an *Academy Award* for Best Original Song and a *Critics Choice Award* for Best Animated Feature, and the song from the movie, “When You Believe”, was later popularized as a version by Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey. The five main characters are Moses, Miriam (Moses’s blood sister), Aaron (Moses’s blood brother), Rameses (Moses’s adoptive brother), Pharaoh (Moses’s adoptive father), and Tziporah (Moses’s love interest).

Principle themes in the film include enslavement, family, self-awareness/reflection, power, and perception. The film begins by showing the brutal treatment, including physical beatings of the Hebrews by the Egyptians. The Pharaoh’s power was based solely upon the enslavement of the Hebrews, and, as an emblematic work, it can be representative of mistreatment of different groups of people over time, right up to contemporary incarceration and solitary confinement of, for example, African American and Latino men in jails and prisons all across America for petty drug crimes.¹ There have always been groups of people that have been treated as less human than other groups, and if we are to imagine a comparison between the events portrayed in this film and the current border situation in the U.S., we can invoke the example of how refugees or undocumented migrants are treated at the southern border of the country, even when they are exercising their legal right to claim asylum. The Hebrews faced many challenges in Egypt, namely being treated like “dirt” as a result of their enslavement by Pharaoh, and migrants, similarly demonized, encounter similar challenges in host countries, leading to alienation, abandonment, and rejection.

To protect her baby boy from the torture and turmoil of the Hebrews by the Egyptians, Moses’s mother sends him across the river in a basket so that he wouldn’t be born into slavery. The film beautifully renders the scene, as Moses’s mom sings to him as he floats across the river. Moses was picked up by Pharaoh’s wife, and they adopted him as part of their royal family. He grew up thinking that Pharaoh was his biological father, and that Rameses was his biological brother, but about halfway through the film Moses learns that he is actually a Hebrew who comes from a family of slaves.

Moses, raised as a full-fledged member of a royal family, didn’t want for anything; he was *The Prince of Egypt*. However, over time, Moses learned that having all the jewels, glamour, silver, and gold is not enough to make one happy, and moreover, that his God had a bigger and better calling for his life. Moses and his adoptive brother Rameses were very competitive as they grew up, especially since they were similar in age and competing to be the next king in line after Pharaoh. They had a close relationship, but they were also always fighting with each other, as most siblings do. While Rameses cared about pleasing his father and doing no wrong, Moses was carefree and cared more about having fun and making people laugh. Because Moses never knew his biological family, he felt abandoned most of his life. There was also something missing, but he didn’t quite know what it was. Once he learned that he was actually a Hebrew slave and not a Prince, he realized that finding his real family was the missing piece of the puzzle that he had to put back together. As the film pulls on the viewers’ heart strings, it also provides instructive echoes of the

¹ Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010) provides harrowing details of how this modern day incarceration movement, sometimes akin to slavery, functions.

current era, as parents are separated from their children at the border between U.S. and Mexico. These children likely feel abandoned, lost, and afraid, and it's likely that a film like this one can induce viewers to imagine that Moses's experience, once he realized he was not a prince, could be similar to refugees' experiences in their own country.

Near the middle of the film, Moses is reunited with his biological brother and sister, and it seems that his mother had already passed away at that point. Moses, who never knew his mother, now embraces his brother and sister as his "true family", an act that shows him the importance of family ties. For most refugees, bereft of all belongings, family is all they have, and family is everything to them. Unfortunately, unlike Moses, most migrant children do not have the opportunity to be reunited with their families once they are separated from their parents. For example, almost 500 migrant children that have been taken from their parents still remain in U.S. custody.² Some reunifications have been made, but "the pace of reunification has slowed significantly, leaving hundreds of [children] scattered in shelters that cost taxpayers \$250 to \$750 per child per day."³ Unlike the film, cases involving migrants and refugees don't have happy endings.

The film also discusses Moses's journey over time. Growing up, he battled with a sense of inferiority and questioned the existence of God, but over time he developed faith, suggesting that his experience as the Prince of Egypt helped to mold him into the man whom he would eventually become—the leader of the Hebrews. From this perspective, it would seem that God had a plan for his life. The image of this revolution is rendered through his relationship to his family, which began with ignorance and betrayal, and, as the process of finding himself unfolds, he also learns to embrace his background and family history.

Moses's experience of self-reflection occurs in part through a dream that's displayed in a very dramatic scene in the film. He thereby recognized that he really was not a prince, which causes him to become afraid, sad, angry, and confused and induces him to flee from his own past, both literally and figuratively. He would have to face his past before he could define his future. As a result, he slowly began to move forward.

Moses thought he had power as the Prince of Egypt, but the real power came from God. After their conversation at the burning bush, God gave Moses a staff, the symbol of the power of Jesus Christ, to fight off the evilness of Pharaoh. Moses went to Rameses and told him to "let [his] people go." When Rameses refused to let the Hebrew slaves go, the staff turned into a serpent, and when Rameses continued his defiance of God, he brought the ten biblical plagues upon himself and upon his Egyptian followers. After his conversation with God at the burning bush, Moses realized that being a slave owner does not give you power and again, extending this message into the current context, a message from the film could be that to treat people as if they are less than human because of their citizenship status does not give citizens or their leaders any more power.

The film also shows the power of forgiveness; Moses shunned his biological family when he first met them, but they later forgave him, providing Moses, Miriam, and Aaron with the power to work together. Tziporah also forgave Moses for how he treated her when he was a prince, which led to the promotion of love and respect for one another. Finally, Moses forgave himself for sinning, and recognizing through forgiveness that those sins didn't have to define who he was as a person.

² Maria Sacchetti, *Still separated: Nearly 500 migrants children taken from their parents remain in U.S. custody*, WASH POST, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/immigration/still-separated-nearly-500-separated-migrant-children-remain-in-us-custody/2018/08/30/6dbd8278-aa09-11e8-8a0c-70b618c98d3c_story.html?utm_term=.0403ea616c82 last visited Nov. 27, 2018.

³ *Id.*

Moses forgave himself for killing an Egyptian who had been brutally beating a Hebrew slave, and only then was he able to truly lead the Hebrew slaves to freedom.

Although the film is animated and marketed for children, it is a family film that is appropriate for all ages, although different age groups are likely to perceive its message in different ways. Most people are visual learners, so watching the film will surely help to learn the story maybe more so than just reading it directly from the Bible. Growing up, this was one of my favorite childhood movies. However, watching it for this class as an adult was a completely different experience for me. I saw the movie in a whole new light and picked up on things that I had not noticed when I watched the film as a child.

In the [Book of Exodus, Chapter 3](#), Moses and God have a one-on-one conversation in a story that is known as the “burning bush.” The film also depicts this story in a [six-minute scene that dramatizes Moses’s incomprehension at having been chosen by God](#) to lead the Hebrew slaves to freedom:

Come now therefore, and I will send unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth My people and the children of Israel out of Egypt. And Moses said unto God: Who am I, that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? . . . 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. ⁴

In the course of the conversation, Moses realized that God was molding him to be the leader that God wanted him to be. Moses questioned God, and questioned His plan, but was finally convinced, and perhaps viewers could be convinced that they too have power, even in the face of great odds, to effect real change in their lives.

The mistreatment of the Hebrews by Pharaoh could be compared to border deaths, which have been on the rise for the last couple of decades. Both children and adults have died at the border as a result of the mistreatment of the host country. According to the United Nations’ Migration Agency, “[t]he number of migrants who died at the U.S.-Mexico border rose in 2017 even as the number of attempted border crossings fell dramatically.”⁵ These numbers are sure to continue to rise in today’s political climate as tear gas is being used to turn both adults and children away at the border.

In summary, the themes in the *Prince of Egypt* are just as relevant today as they were 20 years ago when the film was made. Migrants and refugees experience the same brutal and inhumane treatment as did the Hebrews before Moses led them to freedom under God’s direction. The Hebrews didn’t know that God was going to free them while they were experiencing tribulations and turmoil, but God knew all along. Once Moses became their leader, they got a sense of hope.

⁴ *Exodus Chapter 3*, <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0203.htm> last visited Oct. 24, 2018.

⁵ *U.S.-Mexico border migrant deaths rose in 2017, even as crossings fell, UN says*, THE GUARDIAN, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/06/us-mexico-border-migrant-deaths-rose-2017> last visited Oct. 23, 2018.

That hope is beautifully portrayed in the film as Tziporah and Miriam sing “When You Believe,” as the slaves are led to freedom.

Unfortunately, in this political climate, it is very hard for migrants and refugees to have that same type of hope. Especially with the continuous conversation surrounding “building a wall” at the U.S.-Mexico border. Moreover, the treatment of migrant and refugees is continuously getting worse over time. At this point, their only hopes are a drastic change in the political climate in 2020 and that their hearts and minds will change from hatred and hierarchy to love and acceptance. Hopefully, there are brighter days ahead for migrants and refugees, and that they too, will be able to experience a sense of revelation and rejuvenation as the Hebrews did when they were freed from slavery.

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