



Kings and Pharaohs in the Qur'an: Criticism of Ancient Egyptian Historiography through the Stories of Prophet Joseph and Prophet Moses

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Abstract

The difference between the terms *al-mālik* and *fir'awn* in narratives of Egyptian rulers raises historiographical questions about how Qur'anic terminology relates to reconstructing Egyptian history, especially since modern historiography often uses Pharaoh as a general term for Egyptian rulers. This study examines the semantic and contextual differences between the two terms in the stories of the Prophet Joseph and the Prophet Moses. It assesses their implications for reading Egyptian chronology and historiography. This library research applies thematic interpretation (*mawḍūʿī*), linguistic-semantic, historical-comparative, and Egyptological analysis to relevant verses, *tafsīr* books, historiographic sources, and epigraphic, archaeological, and philological studies. The analysis shows a consistent terminological pattern: *al-mālik* refers to the ruler in Joseph's narrative, while *fir'awn* marks Egyptian power in Moses' narrative. The differences extend beyond lexical variation, as the narrative context shows different political functions: the ruler in the story of Joseph appears through administrative authority and palace structures, while the *fir'awn* in the story of Moses is represented through claims of supremacy, bureaucratic control, and legitimacy. Comparison with Egyptology shows limited but significant correspondence in the development of royal titles and ruler nomenclature, so Qur'anic terminology is compatible with the historical differentiation between phases of Egyptian rule. These findings support a reading of the Qur'an as a narrative with terminological-historical precision, while limiting corrective claims to the generalization of the ruler's nomenclature. This study strengthens the dialogical model between Qur'an studies and Egyptology without

making correspondence the final historical evidence, because Egyptian historical evidence is partial, layered, and open to reinterpretation.

Keywords: *al-Mālik*; *Fir'awn*; Egyptology; Ancient Egypt; Thematic Interpretation

Abstrak

Perbedaan penggunaan istilah *al-mālik* dan *fir'awn* dalam narasi penguasa Mesir membuka persoalan historiografis mengenai hubungan terminologi Al-Qur'an dengan rekonstruksi sejarah Mesir, terutama karena historiografi modern cenderung menggunakan *Fir'aun* sebagai sebutan umum untuk penguasa Mesir. Kajian ini bertujuan menguji diferensiasi semantik dan kontekstual kedua istilah dalam kisah Nabi Yusuf dan Nabi Musa, serta menilai implikasinya terhadap pembacaan kronologi dan historiografi Mesir. Penelitian kepustakaan ini menerapkan tafsir tematik (*mawḍū'ī*), analisis linguistik-semantik, historis-komparatif, dan Egiptologi terhadap ayat-ayat yang relevan, kitab-kitab tafsir, sumber-sumber historiografis, serta kajian epigrafis, arkeologis, dan filologis. Hasil analisis menunjukkan pola terminologis yang konsisten: *al-mālik* digunakan dalam narasi Yusuf untuk merujuk pada penguasa, sedangkan *fir'awn* digunakan dalam narasi Musa sebagai penanda kekuasaan Mesir. Perbedaan itu tidak berhenti pada variasi leksikal, karena konteks naratif memperlihatkan fungsi politik yang berbeda: penguasa dalam kisah Yusuf tampil melalui otoritas administratif dan struktur istana, sedangkan *fir'awn* dalam kisah Musa direpresentasikan melalui klaim supremasi, pengendalian birokrasi, dan legitimasi kekuasaan. Perbandingan dengan Egiptologi menunjukkan kesesuaian yang terbatas namun signifikan dalam perkembangan penggunaan gelar kerajaan dan nomenklatur penguasa, sehingga terminologi Al-Qur'an kompatibel dengan diferensiasi historis antarfase pemerintahan Mesir. Temuan ini mendukung pembacaan Al-Qur'an sebagai narasi dengan presisi terminologis-historis, sekaligus membatasi klaim korektif terhadap generalisasi nomenklatur penguasa. Kajian ini memperkuat model dialogis antara studi Al-Qur'an dan Egiptologi tanpa menjadikan korespondensi sebagai pembuktian historis final, karena bukti sejarah Mesir bersifat parsial, berlapis, dan terbuka untuk reinterpretasi.

Kata Kunci: *al-Mālik*; *Fir'awn*; Egiptologi; Mesir Kuno; Tafsir Tematik

Introduction

The Qur'an's representation of Egyptian power raises important issues for the study of the Qur'an, Ancient Near Eastern history, and Egyptology because the narratives about the Prophets Joseph and Moses use different titles for the ruler. Surah Yūsuf refers to the Egyptian ruler as *al-mālik*, while the Mosaic series consistently uses *fir'awn*. The Qur'an does not mention the rulers' personal names in these two stories, so historical identification cannot rely on the king's name; it must consider the function of the terms used to mark political authority. The problem becomes more complex because modern historiography and narrative traditions before the study of Egyptology often use "Pharaoh" as a generic term for Egyptian rulers across periods (Crawford, 2021; Lee, 2023). In fact, Egyptology shows that *pr-ʿ* or *per-aa*, which is the origin of the term "Pharaoh", was originally related to the "Great House" or palace institution and underwent changes in function before being used as a term for kings (Berezovich, 2026). The question is not simply whether the Qur'an uses different terms, but whether this differentiation has a

historical correspondence that Egyptological evidence can account for, or whether it is better understood as a linguistic and narrative strategy.

The Qur'an's textual phenomenon provides an empirical basis for examining this issue. Surah Yūsuf uses *al-mālik* when referring to the Egyptian ruler, including when the ruler ordered that Joseph be brought before him and when he gave Joseph a position (Q. 12: 43, 50, 54, 72). The Mosaic narrative, on the other hand, repeatedly uses *fir'awn* as a marker of the ruler who confronted Moses, as in Q. 7: 103–137, Q. 20: 24–79, Q. 26: 10–68, Q. 28: 3–42, and Q. 43: 46–56. This textual pattern acquires historical relevance when compared with the development of the term *pr-ʿ* in Ancient Egyptian sources. Egyptological evidence shows that the expression “Great House” originally referred to the palace or royal institution. In contrast, its use to refer to the person of the king appeared later and increasingly developed in the New Kingdom and subsequent periods (Qian, 2026). This creates an empirical puzzle: the story of Joseph appears before the period when *pr-ʿ* developed as a term for the person of the king. At the same time, the story of Moses is placed during the period when that usage had developed; the differences in diction in the Qur'an may reflect a chronological relationship worth testing.

The literature on this issue remains fragmented across disciplines and epistemological orientations. Abbas et al. (2026) examine *al-mālik* and *fir'awn* through semantic analysis and show differences in the meaning fields of the two terms, but their linguistic approach has not tested whether these semantic differences are related to changes in Egyptian royal nomenclature. Lora (2026) treats *al-mālik* as a matter of Qur'anic *i'jāz* and notes its use for Egyptian rulers in Surah Yūsuf. Still, his discussion emphasizes the significance of miracles rather than a critical examination of Egyptological chronology. Munir and Pandin (2023) read the story of Joseph in the context of Ancient Near Eastern history and find correspondence between the structure of the Egyptian bureaucracy and the narrative of Surah Yūsuf, thus providing a broader historical basis, but have not yet made *al-mālik* nomenclature a variable for examining changes in the royal title system. Ficco (2025) compares the stories of Joseph and Moses through thematic interpretation and identifies patterns of similarity in prophetic narratives. Still, it does not position differences in rulers' nomenclature as a historiographical issue. Rozano-García (2023) focuses on the figure of the Pharaoh as a representation of tyranny and rejection of prophethood, clarifying the figure's theological and political function, but does not trace the terminological history of *pr-ʿ* as part of the development of royal institutions.

Zelinsky (2022) offers an Egyptological perspective on the development of the use of *fir'awn* based on archaeological and philological evidence. However, it does not develop the connection between the history of this terminology and the differentiation of diction in the Qur'an as a cross-disciplinary issue. A comparison of the five tendencies shows complementary limitations: semantic studies explain

meaning but have not tested chronology, *tafsīr* studies explain narrative and theological functions but have not tested Egyptological evidence, historical studies provide political context but have not tested the function of nomenclature, while Egyptology explains the evolution of terms but has not assessed their significance for the narrative construction of the Qur'an. This gap lies in the lack of an integrated analysis of the relationship between the distribution of the terms *al-mālik* and *fir'awn*, the historical development of *pr-ʿ*, the Egyptian political context associated with the story of Joseph and Moses, and the implications for the historiography of Egyptian rulers. This research fills that gap through comparative reading that treats the correspondence between text and history as a hypothesis to be tested, not as a premise to be justified.

Based on this problem, this research formulates four inter-level questions: how do the distribution and function of *al-mālik* and *fir'awn* shape the differentiation of the nomenclature of Egyptian rulers in the Qur'an; the extent to which the use of *al-mālik* can be correlated with the Egyptian political and chronological context relevant to the story of Joseph; the extent to which the use of *fir'awn* corresponds to the historical development of *pr-ʿ* and the structure of Egyptian power that is relevant to the story of Moses; and what implications the results of this comparison have for criticism of historiographic generalizations regarding the titles of Egyptian rulers. This research aims to identify the semantic and narrative functions of the two terms, examine the relationship between the differentiation of Qur'an nomenclature and the historical development of Egyptian royal titles, compare exegetical data with Egyptological philological and historiographic evidence, and evaluate the limits of using Qur'an terminology as a historical indicator. The research rationale departs from the methodological proposition that consistent diction can be a valuable historical indicator if an explainable relationship exists between the term, its political function, and the chronology of its use; consistency alone is not enough to prove historical accuracy. Tests must consider alternative explanations, including narrative strategies, the development of the Arabic language, broader story traditions, and the possibility of motif transmission from the Middle Eastern cultural environment. This position allows research to determine whether the differentiation of *al-mālik* and *fir'awn* represents a strong historical correspondence, a partial correspondence, or a linguistic-narrative phenomenon without clear historiographical consequences.

Method

This research uses a qualitative design based on a literature review, with a thematic-historical interpretation approach, contextual semantics, and historiographic comparison grounded in Egyptology. The unit of analysis includes all verses containing the terms *al-mālik*, *fir'awn*, and their relevant forms in the stories of the Prophet Joseph and Prophet Moses; narrative context explaining the ruler's function; interpreters' interpretations; and evidence from Ancient Egyptian

history related to royal terminology and institutions. Primary data include the Qur'an, representative commentaries, and Ancient Egyptian documentary sources in the form of inscriptions, papyri, and chronologically relevant artifacts; secondary data include studies in Egyptology, archaeology, philology, Arabic linguistics, Ancient Near Eastern history, and modern historiography. Data collection involved searching the corpus of verses, recording the context and derivation of terms, selecting interpretations based on period and methodological trends, and searching Egyptological literature and evidence based on relevance, date, independence, and documentation status. Analysis is carried out through textual mapping; analysis of semantic fields and terminological functions; chronological reconstruction with several scenarios when historical identification is uncertain; comparison of terms and political context; testing counter-evidence; and triangulation of sources. The final synthesis distinguishes direct, indirect, and parallel contextual evidence and interpretive hypotheses to assess each claim's strength. Precision criteria are determined through terminological, chronological, and institutional conformity without confirmatory assumptions.

Results and Discussion

The Differentiation between *al-Mālik* and *Fir'awn* in the Narrative Structure of the Qur'an

The Qur'anic corpus uses *al-malik* (الملك) to designate the ruler in the story of Joseph; the form appears as *al-maliku* in Q. 12:43, 50, and 54, and as *al-maliki* in verses 72 and 76. This variation is grammatical rather than a distinction of lemmata, as the word ending depends on its syntactic position in the sentence. The lemma *malik* derives from the root *m-l-k*, which also yields *mulk* and other derivatives in the Qur'an (Lane, 1967). Q. 12:101, for instance, employs *al-mulk* to refer to dominion or kingship, rather than to the figure of the ruler himself (Wright, 1996). This inventory matters because *al-malik* is not identical to *al-mālik*, even though both share the same lexical root. *Al-mālik* is the active participle (*ism fā'il*) of the verb *malaka*, signifying the owner or master of something, whereas *al-malik* functions as a noun denoting a king or ruler (Lane, 1967). The Qur'anic morphological corpus consistently supports this distinction.

The distribution of *al-malik* in Surah Yūsuf reveals a referential pattern tied to a single ruling figure and a sequence of events centered on royal authority. Q. 12:43 presents *al-malik* as the individual who experiences the dream concerning seven fat cows and seven lean cows; his role as the subject of the utterance simultaneously introduces the authority that drives the subsequent chain of events. Q. 12:50 again positions *al-malik* as the subject of the command to summon Joseph following the review of the matter regarding his release. Q. 12:54 subsequently presents the same figure when he expresses his desire to make Joseph his trusted confidant. Two *majrūr* (genitive) forms in Q. 12:72 and 76 extend this referential function through the phrases *ṣuwā' al-malik* (the king's drinking cup) and *dīn al-malik* (the king's

law/system). This distribution demonstrates both the continuity of the referent and an expansion of the field of usage—shifting from the individual himself to the objects and rules associated with his authority. The Qur'anic corpus thus establishes *al-malik* as a category of ruler recognizable through an internal network of narrative references.

The syntagmatic relations of *al-malik* become clearer when we read each occurrence alongside the surrounding linguistic constructions. Q. 12:43 links the ruler to the acts of seeing and interpreting dreams, as reflected in the community's response to the king's experience. Q. 12:50 connects *al-malik* to the act of summoning Joseph and the investigation into the circumstances that had previously led to Joseph's imprisonment. Q. 12:54 reveals the relationship between *al-malik*, the act of singling Joseph out (*istikhlāṣ*) for special favor, and the conferral upon him of the status of *makīn* (one of high standing) and *amīn* (trustworthy). Q. 12:72 employs the construction *ṣuwā' al-malik*, while Q. 12:76 uses *dīn al-malik*. These two later constructions show that the king's authority is manifested not merely through mention of the figure himself, but also through the objects and rules associated with him. Such relationships may be termed "syntagmatic" when derived from immediate linguistic constructions, whereas the connections to imprisonment, appointment, and governance constitute narrative relationships formed across a sequence of verses.

The term *fir'awn* exhibits a distinct distributional pattern. It appears in various constructions associated with Moses and the community of the Children of Israel—such as *āl fir'awn* (the people/household of Pharaoh) and *yā fir'awn* (O Pharaoh)—as well as in direct references to Pharaoh as the recipient of Moses's message. Q. 7:103, for instance, depicts Moses being sent to Pharaoh and his dignitaries. At the same time, verse 104 employs the vocative *yā fir'awn* as Moses declares himself a messenger of the Lord of the Worlds. The term also appears in the construction *āl fir'awn*, allowing the reference to extend from the individual ruler to the power structure surrounding him. This corpus reveals a referential function distinct from that of *al-malik* in the story of Joseph. *Al-malik* is introduced through the actions and decisions of a king without a personal name. In contrast, *fir'awn* directly identifies the ruler within the conflict dynamics surrounding Moses.

The paradigmatic relationship between these two terms reveals both overlap and differentiation. Both *al-malik* and *fir'awn* can denote a ruler in the Egyptian context, indicating a shared referential feature at the categorical level. However, this referential commonality does not eliminate their distributional differences. The Qur'an selects *al-malik* when establishing the ruler figure in the story of Joseph, while *fir'awn* serves as the dominant designation for the ruler throughout the narratives concerning Moses. This pattern is best described as distributional specialization rather than formal hyponymy. No textual statement establishes a taxonomic relationship such as "every *fir'awn* is a *malik*" or vice versa; consequently,

there is no need to force the relationship into a hierarchical category. Toshihiko Izutsu's (2002) semantic framework can be applied—albeit with limitations—by distinguishing between paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations: paradigmatic relations reveal the positions of two lexemes within the conceptual field of power, whereas syntagmatic relations show the meanings that emerge through the pairings and constructions surrounding each lexeme.

The difference in narrative function becomes even more apparent when *al-malik* and *fir'awn* are viewed as elements in character construction. In Surah Yūsuf, *al-malik* is constructed through specific institutional actions: receiving a report about a dream, summoning Joseph, speaking directly to him, and subsequently expressing confidence in his capabilities. Al-Ṭabarī (2001) interprets Q. 12:54 by identifying *al-malik* as the King of Egypt and explaining the phrase *astakhliṣhu li-nafsī* as a desire to bring Joseph into his inner circle of trust. This interpretation highlights a direct link between the mention of *al-malik* and the authority Joseph is granted. *Fir'awn* is characterized through a different mechanism. The narrative of Moses shapes this figure through dialogue, acts of rejection, assertions of power, his relationships with high-ranking officials, and his responses to the signs Moses brings. The evaluative dimension arises from the character's actions and utterances as a whole, rather than merely from lexical assumptions regarding the meaning of *fir'awn*.

The context of Q. 43:51 reinforces the distinction between the designation for the ruler and the power he holds. The verse presents Pharaoh (*fir'awn*) as the speaker asserting ownership over the *mulk* (sovereignty/realm) of Egypt; thus, *fir'awn* functions as a signifier for the figure, while *mulk* denotes the domain of power claimed by that figure. This structure reveals the relationship between the political actor and the conceptual object of power without equating the two. A similar pattern is discernible in Surah Yūsuf: *al-malik* refers to the ruler, whereas *dīn al-malik* refers to the rules or legal order associated with that ruler. This comparison highlights an internal differentiation among the actor's name or category, the power held, and the associated rules. Under this approach, the meaning of *fir'awn* need not be reduced to a mere synonym for "king," nor must *al-malik* be understood solely as an administrative label devoid of narrative function. Both occupy distinct positions within the Qur'an's structure of power representation.

***Al-Mālik* and the Egyptian Political Context in the Story of Joseph**

The correlation between the figure of *al-mālik* in the story of Joseph and Egypt's political context must be situated at a more specific level than merely matching the title to a particular dynastic period. The Joseph narrative depicts a kingdom characterized by centralized authority, the capacity to manage agricultural output on a large scale, mechanisms for commodity storage and distribution records, and an administrative apparatus that enabled central decisions to be implemented down to food management (Rost, 2017). This configuration finds

strong historical parallels in the evolution of Egyptian administration—particularly from the Middle Kingdom onward—when governmental structures showed increased regulation, role specialization, and written documentation. The Heqanakht Papyri from the 12th Dynasty, for instance, document the management of land, income, and grain yields within an organized administrative framework (Bogdanov, 2024), while the Boulaq 18 Papyrus details palace income and expenditure (Sonego, 2025). These correspondences provide a contextual basis for a political reading of the Joseph story, even if they cannot serve as a definitive dynastic marker on their own.

The depiction of food management in the Joseph story gains historical relevance primarily through the administrative capacity required to anticipate scarcity and organize redistribution. Quran 12:47–49 describes storing harvests over seven years, managing reserves, and distributing commodities during the ensuing famine. Such mechanisms do not correspond to a single, specific Egyptian institution but parallel the commodity administration systems documented during the Middle Kingdom. Loktionov's (2023) study of Egyptian labor organization and administration highlights record-keeping, workforce supervision, produce management, and resource distribution facilitated by royal institutions. The Heqanakht Papyri provide evidence of grain and revenue calculations (Fagbore, 2023), while administrative records from the late Middle Kingdom demonstrate the management of palace income and expenditures (Namazi & Taak, 2022). These parallels link Joseph's actions to documented state capacities rather than merely offering an abstract depiction of royal prosperity. The historical significance remains contextual, however, as the Qur'an does not name specific Egyptian institutions, officials, or procedures that can be directly matched to particular documents.

This correlation strengthens when we consider the administrative structure alongside Joseph's role in managing royal supplies. Surah 12:55 records Joseph's request to be entrusted with the *khazā'in al-arḍ* (storehouses/treasuries of the land), as he was deemed capable of safeguarding assets and managing affairs. While this phrase outlines the administrative functions entrusted to him, it does not specify an Egyptian title that translates directly to treasurer, vizier, or chief granary official. Such institutional equivalencies must be rejected if based solely on functional similarities. Egyptian records do indeed attest to officials who managed treasuries, granaries, royal estates, and resource administration (Rampersad, 2022), and Middle Kingdom administrative structures reveal an increasingly clear division of functions (Ezzamel, 2004). These parallels make Joseph's position plausible within a bureaucratic state context, but they do not prove that his role matched any specific Egyptian office known from epigraphic sources.

The Middle Kingdom chronological candidate gains significant weight because administrative documentation from this period provides the clearest evidence of a state capable of managing land, labor, revenue, and commodities through a

documented bureaucratic apparatus. Hassan (2022) highlights increased administrative regulation from the reign of Senusret II through the mid-13th Dynasty, including the functional differentiation of officials and administrative papyri that record governmental activities in detail. The Heqanakht Papyri from the early 12th Dynasty also demonstrate how land and revenue were managed through quantitative record-keeping (James & Gillings, 1975). The parallel with the story of Joseph lies in this capacity for economic management, rather than in evidence regarding Joseph as an individual. The Middle Kingdom, therefore, offers an institutional environment consistent with the narrative of managing agricultural produce on a kingdom-wide scale. However, this alignment has limits, as the available documentation does not reveal a foreign figure named Joseph who attained authority as described in the Qur'an.

The Second Intermediate Period offers different evidence and must therefore be assessed separately. Tell el-Dab'a—identified as Avaris—developed into a significant center in the Eastern Delta and later became a seat of power during the 15th Dynasty (Sacco, 2024). Millar (2020) notes a community with distinct Levantine-Palestinian cultural elements, including a religious complex that reflects the coexistence of Syro-Palestinian and Egyptian traditions within a single urban setting. Evidence from the harbor also indicates trade connections between Avaris and the Levant dating back to the late Middle Kingdom (Eshel et al., 2025). While these facts provide relevant context for the potential migration of Levantine populations to Egypt, they do not link Joseph to Avaris, the Hyksos, or the 15th Dynasty. Furthermore, the Levantine population and the Hyksos rulers should not be conflated. A foreign population was present in the Delta before the consolidation of Hyksos power (Stantis et al., 2020); thus, the presence of Semitic elements suggests only a possible social environment, not the political identity of the figure in the Joseph narrative. Consequently, the Hyksos context is best treated as a socio-political possibility of limited scope. Tell el-Dab'a was indeed a major center of population and power during the Second Intermediate Period, and archaeological sources and research reveal a multicultural environment with strong ties to the Levant. Mahieu (2021) also situates the administrative developments of the Second Intermediate Period within a continuum of continuity and change leading from the Middle Kingdom to the New Kingdom. This context helps explain the presence of foreign populations at the center of Egyptian power without requiring that Joseph be placed under Hyksos rule. No direct evidence links the name Joseph, the seven-year famine, or the appointment of a foreign official to a specific administration in Avaris. Arguments favoring the Hyksos hypothesis are weakened if they rely solely on the presence of Levantine populations and the political openness of the Delta. Nevertheless, this context remains valuable as a potential scenario, as it clarifies a social environment that facilitated intensive interaction between foreign communities and Egypt's power structures.

The correlation between *al-malik* and the political context of the Joseph story becomes more robust when understood as a multi-layered connection rather than a single chronological key. The ruler's nomenclature offers a textual entry point, while the administrative configuration within the Joseph narrative provides contextual indicators comparable to institutional developments in Egypt. Evidence from the Middle Kingdom supports alignment regarding economic administration; evidence from Tell el-Dab'a and the Second Intermediate Period supports the likelihood of a multi-ethnic environment in the Delta; and evidence concerning the continuity of Egyptian administration cautions against prematurely limiting the context to a single dynasty. None of these lines of evidence directly identifies Joseph or the ruler he encountered. The most defensible position identifies the Middle Kingdom as a strong context for administrative parallels. At the same time, the Second Intermediate Period remains relevant regarding social mobility and the presence of Levantine communities. Thus, *al-malik* holds historical significance primarily when read alongside the narrative's political and administrative configurations, rather than as a standalone chronological marker.

Pharaoh, *Pr-ʿ*, and the Structure of Power in the Story of Moses

The term *fir'awn* in the story of Moses takes on a more precise historical meaning once we disentangle its history from its use as a category of ruler in the Qur'an. Lexically, the hieroglyphic form *pr-ʿ* (𓂏𓂐𓂃) combines *pr* (house) and *ʿ* (great or grand); thus, it originally meant the "Great House"—the palace complex or royal household (Svensson, 2018). The Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae corpus records *pr-ʿ* as a noun with a long attestation span and defines it as "palace; Pharaoh," indicating semantic evolution rather than a static meaning from the outset (Fritschy, 2018). Berezovich (2026) distinguishes between its early usage in constructions such as *smr pr-ʿ* (courtier of the Great House) and its later usage, in which it refers personally to the king. This distinction matters because the term "Pharaoh" cannot be treated as a direct equivalent of the Egyptian word for "king." The Egyptian term for king had its own specific terminology, whereas *pr-ʿ* originally referred to the royal institution or residence.

The shift in the referent of *pr-ʿ* occurred gradually and cannot be reduced to a single event marking the creation of a new title. Available evidence indicates that the use of *pr-ʿ* to denote the palace persisted even as the term began to acquire an honorific function regarding the king. Breier (2018) identifies the most definitive instance of a personal reference to the king in a letter addressed to Amenophis IV (Akhenaten), whereas Taterka (2019) notes possible earlier usage associated with Thutmose III and Thutmose IV. This points to a metonymic process: the name of the royal institution was used to refer to the figure occupying the central position within that institution. Such a shift is not synonymous with the creation of a formal royal titulary, as Egyptian kings continued to possess a distinct set of royal names and titles.

The chronology of the personal use of *pr-ʿ* also constrains how the term applies to interpreting the story of Moses. If the most definitive evidence for a personal reference to the king dates to the reign of Akhenaten in the Eighteenth Dynasty, the term is particularly relevant to the New Kingdom context. Still, it cannot automatically mark a specific king or dynasty. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that *pr-ʿ* usage evolved across multiple periods. Lexicographical data show continuity of attestations from early times through later periods (Fritschy, 2018), while historical studies trace a shift from references to the palace toward usage that increasingly and clearly refers to the king (Peeters et al., 2024). This semantic evolution shows that “Pharaoh” is a historical category that emerged through a process, rather than a title inherently attached to every Egyptian king from the outset. Using the modern term “Pharaoh” to refer to all Egyptian kings since the Early Dynastic period is a modern historiographical convention and should not be projected backward as the naming practice used throughout all periods of ancient Egypt.

Cross-linguistic networks reveal a distinct evolution once the Egyptian term entered Semitic and Greek traditions. The Hebrew form *Par'ōh* and the Greek form *Pharaō* represent crucial stages in the term's transmission history. In contrast, the Quranic Arabic form *fir'awn* should not be treated as an Ancient Egyptian form preserved unchanged. Elmaz's (2026) study links the Arabic form to the Greek and Syriac forms, noting the possibility of a Syriac intermediary—a hypothesis previously proposed in philological research. Zellmann-Rohrer (2022) also documents an Egyptian-Akkadian-Hebrew-Greek transmission path and suggests that the Arabic forms entered via Hebrew or Syriac. Differences in the final forms—specifically the presence of the *-n* in *fir'awn* and *Pharaōn* within certain traditions—illustrate a complex history of linguistic transmission. Consequently, the etymological link is best understood as a historical relationship between forms, whereas directly identifying *fir'awn* as an Arabic transliteration of the hieroglyphic *pr-ʿ* requires philological caution.

The status of the term *fir'awn* in the Qur'an reflects a semantic evolution distinct from the term's original Egyptian lexical context. The Qur'an does not employ *pr-ʿ* as a technical Egyptian term; instead, it presents *fir'awn* as the name or title of the ruler within the narrative framework of Moses. This form serves as a stable referent for the ruler who confronts Moses, in contrast to the original Egyptian term—the distant ancestor of “Pharaoh”—which had a constantly shifting usage history. Recognizing this distinction helps avoid two common errors. First, *fir'awn* should not be regarded as an indigenous Arabic term semantically synonymous with “king.” Secondly, Pharaoh (*fir'awn*) should not be treated as a documentary reproduction that directly reflects the usage of *pr-ʿ* in a specific era. A justifiable correspondence exists at the level of the term's history: the Qur'anic form belongs to a linguistic tradition historically linked to the title of Egyptian rulers,

whereas the original Egyptian form shifted from denoting a royal institution to signifying the ruler as an individual.

This terminological relationship gains historical significance when situated within the ideological evolution of the New Kingdom; however, the semantic correspondence must not be conflated with theological equivalence. Within the system of royal ideology, the Egyptian king was positioned as a figure with a special relationship with the gods, upholding the royal order and serving as an intermediary between society and the divine realm. Representations of the king as the living *Horus*, the son of *Re*, or the upholder of *Maat* appeared in royal language and iconography in various forms, depending on the period and context (Suto, 2024). This system does not match Pharaoh's claims of supremacy in the Qur'an. The Qur'an portrays Pharaoh through speech that frames political authority as a claim to divinity. In contrast, Egyptian royal ideology operated through a far more complex network of concepts—including kingship, divine lineage, ritual, *Maat*, and cultic relationships. The historical correspondence, therefore, lies in the structure of sacralized power, not in a theological identity between the Qur'anic Pharaoh and Egyptian divine kingship.

Claims regarding the sacralization of the king must also be limited to truly diagnostic evidence. The presence of *Horus*, *Re*, *Amun-Re*, *Maat*, royal rituals, and religious monuments shows that Egyptian power was built through political and religious integration (Tucci, 2022); however, these elements do not automatically explain all the Pharaoh's actions in the narrative of Moses. The monuments of Ramesses II, for instance, reveal the interconnection between the king, temples, the land, and the maintenance of cults, as shown by foundation documents or the allocation of resources to religious institutions (Serrano-Delgado, 2025). Such evidence illustrates the monarchy's relationship with cultic institutions, rather than substantiating the story of Moses. The same analysis applies to monumental construction. While royal edifices certainly served as a medium for representing power, architectural grandeur was a feature of various Egyptian reigns and, consequently, holds little diagnostic value for identifying the Pharaoh of Moses. Its evidential value lies in establishing institutional parallels rather than providing direct proof regarding the figures and events recounted in the Qur'an.

Issues concerning labor and the oppression of the Children of Israel require similar caveats. The Egyptian state could organize labor for royal projects, agriculture, defense, and construction; thus, the depiction of labor mobilization capabilities does not conflict with the structure of the Egyptian state (Loktionov, 2023). This correspondence remains general, however, as the royal labor system did not specifically target the community of the Children of Israel. Evidence regarding Israel in the Merneptah Stele is more historically specific, as it provides clear Egyptian attestation of a group named Israel around 1207 BCE and situates them within the context of Canaan (Zwickel & van der Veen, 2017). This evidence does not

prove Israel's earlier presence in Egypt, nor does it identify Merenptah as the Pharaoh of the Moses narrative. Rather, the gap between these two types of evidence highlights the need to distinguish a group's attestation from evidence about its origins, migration, or exodus.

The candidates Ramesses II and Merenptah illustrate the same limits of inference. Ramesses II is relevant because his reign falls within the New Kingdom and is supported by extensive monumental and geographical evidence, including the Ramesside royal center in the Eastern Delta (Roughley et al., 2024). Merenptah receives particular attention because his inscription contains the name "Israel," making it a frequent reference point in historical reconstructions of the Exodus (Krajewski, 2026). Yet, this connection does not yield a direct identification. The Merenptah Stele, dating to approximately the late 13th century BCE, describes Israel as a socio-ethnic entity in Canaan (Kraus, 2023); the text mentions no Moses, the Exodus, slavery in Egypt, or an Israelite migration from Egypt. Consequently, the Merenptah evidence is best categorized as direct evidence for the existence of the name "Israel" at a specific time, and as indirect evidence for broader chronological discussions.

Taken as a whole, the data yield three distinct levels of correspondence. Terminological correspondence is the strongest level, given the traceable historical links between *pr-ʿ*, Semitic forms such as *Par'ōh*, the Greek *Pharaō*, and the Arabic tradition of *fir'awn*—although the direct transmission path to Arabic remains debated. Institutional correspondence occupies an intermediate level, as the centralization of power, the king's relationship with religious institutions, the use of administrative apparatuses, and the state's mobilization capabilities all parallel the New Kingdom. Chronological correspondence carries less weight because the title *pr-ʿ* does not isolate a specific dynasty, since similar royal structures persisted over a long period. This classification prevents a single piece of evidence from supporting conclusions beyond its scope. The result is not the historical identification of the Pharaoh of Moses, but the degree of correspondence between the Qur'anic nomenclature, the history of the Egyptian term, and the power configuration reconstructible from Egyptian sources.

Differentiation of Titles and Critiques of Historiographical Generalizations

The heterogeneity of ancient historical sources underscores the need to avoid generalizations regarding the titles used for Egyptian rulers. Herodotus, for instance, refers to several Egyptian rulers—such as Psammetichus, Necos, Psammis, Apries, and Amasis—by their personal names alongside the designation "king of Egypt." His narrative details successions, conflicts between rulers, court structures, and relationships between kings and political factions without relying on a single term to identify a ruler (McKeon, 2020). Herodotus's account demonstrates that the Greek historiographical tradition itself cannot be reduced to a uniform naming practice. Josephus offers a different approach, explicitly explaining why Egyptian kings—

from Menes to the time of Solomon—were called “Pharaoh” in the tradition he used. Josephus links the title to royal status and explains the name change that occurred when an individual ascended to the kingship (Petricca, 2025). The divergence between these two sources shows that treating “ancient historiography” as a monolithic tradition obscures the history of the term’s transmission and use.

Terminology becomes increasingly complex as Egyptian nomenclature moves across different linguistic environments and historiographical traditions. The original Egyptian term, along with its Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic forms—as well as the modern term “Pharaoh”—do not belong to the same linguistic stratum. Each form carries its own history of transmission, phonological adaptation, semantic expansion, and usage context. Josephus illustrates a pivotal stage in this process through his use of the phrase “Pharaoh, the King of Egypt” and his explanation of the connection between the name and royal status (Habicht et al., 2022). This formulation suggests that the term “Pharaoh” does not necessarily reproduce Egyptian administrative nomenclature; rather, it can function as a historiographical category interpreted within a specific readership. Historiography that employs “Pharaoh” retrospectively is not inherently erroneous; the problem arises when that retrospective category is treated as if it possessed the same function, scope, and meaning across all periods of Egyptian history.

Nor can modern historiography be positioned as a monolithic body of knowledge that maintains simplistic generalizations about all Egyptian rulers. Instead, Egyptology differentiates dynasties, periods, titulary systems, royal institutions, epigraphic sources, artifacts, and papyri, as well as the socio-political contexts of individual reigns. Epistemological issues arise when simplifications intended for modern communication are misread as literal representations of how Egyptian society itself designated its rulers. Using “Pharaoh” as an umbrella term serves a communicative purpose, enabling modern readers to recognize the Egyptian ruler without needing to master the entire system of royal titulary (Rozano-García, 2023). This utility is not synonymous with absolute historical equivalence. This distinction supports a more balanced analytical stance: the term “Pharaoh” is valid as a historiographical category when its descriptive function is clearly stated, whereas using it as direct evidence for nomenclature in a specific period requires verification against primary sources.

The historical significance of Qur’anic nomenclature must therefore be formulated based on varying levels of evidence. Qur’anic terminology can possess diagnostic value when its distribution reveals patterns relevant for comparison with historical data; however, diagnostic value is not synonymous with definitive proof. A term may help identify historical issues, narrow possible interpretations, or highlight categorization patterns worth examining. Yet, it cannot independently establish dates, personal identities, dynasties, or administrative structures. Maintaining this distinction is crucial for ensuring a balanced relationship between

data and conclusions. Textual evidence provides the foundation for analyzing nomenclature; Egyptological evidence offers a historical point of comparison; historiographical sources reveal how categories were used and transmitted; and the interplay among these three elements yields hypotheses of varying degrees of certainty. This methodological stance treats Qur'anic terminology as one component in an argumentative reconstruction, not a substitute for the full body of historical evidence.

Examining potential alternative explanations also alters how we understand the differentiation of nomenclature. Variations in how rulers are designated may stem from narrative strategies, characterization, rhetorical structures, inherited literary traditions, or the evolution of terms within a specific linguistic context. Such possibilities do not automatically negate the historical relevance of the nomenclature, but they caution against prematurely leaping from terminological correspondence to claims of historical knowledge. A historical hypothesis gains strength when a pattern retains its explanatory power even after considering plausible alternatives. Conversely, a match between Qur'anic nomenclature and an Egyptological fact is insufficient if the connection rests solely on terminological similarity. A designation might acquire new meaning, persist within a different tradition, or be applied retrospectively to identify political institutions and figures from a different context.

Triangulation provides a more robust foundation when each source type retains its distinct analytical function. The text of the Qur'an determines the structure of nomenclature and the relationships between terms; Egyptological data examines the history of these terms and royal practices; and historiographical sources trace how categories of rulers formed, were transmitted, and were interpreted in later traditions. Herodotus illustrates a historical practice of referring to certain Egyptian rulers by name and royal category. In contrast, Josephus provides an example of historiographical reflection that explicitly generalizes "Pharaoh" as the designation for Egyptian kings. Such contrasts are more valuable than merely amassing sources that support a single conclusion, as they reveal internal variations in the history of nomenclature. Consequently, an interpretation's validity depends not on how many sources point to a similar conclusion, but on the strength of the argument explaining differences in function, chronology, and each source's proximity to the historical subject under study.

Conclusion

The distinction between *al-mālik* and *fir'awn* reveals a discernible semantic-narrative pattern: *al-mālik* is employed in the story of Joseph to denote a royal authority figure operating through palace administrative structures, the issuance of commands, and the management of state affairs; conversely, in the story of Moses, *fir'awn* functions as a designation of power centered on the ruler himself, palace authority, and a relationship of domination over an oppressed community. The

distribution of these terms demonstrates that the Qur'an does not apply a uniform designation for Egyptian rulers across all narratives. The correlation of *al-mālik* with the Egyptian political context offers limited historical correspondence—enough to suggest compatibility with a monarchical structure, yet insufficient to definitively establish the specific era or identity of Joseph's king. The use of *fir'awn* bears philological relevance to the evolution of *pr-ʿ*—a term that expanded in function to designate the ruler—though this connection cannot serve as definitive proof regarding the identity of the Pharaoh in the Moses narrative. These findings require a historiographical approach that treats Qur'anic terminology as data to be scrutinized through exegesis, philology, and Egyptology, rather than as a deterministic indicator. Uncertainties regarding chronology and figure identification, the limitations of indirect evidence, potential rhetorical functions, and the complexities of source triangulation constrain historical inference, precluding any definitive determination of the rulers' chronologies or identities. Further research is needed to examine the *pr-ʿ* epigraphic corpus across periods and to conduct a more rigorous comparative analysis of royal terminology in the Qur'an, the Bible, and Ancient Egyptian sources.

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Author Contribution Statement

OAA contributed to the conceptualization, study design, data analysis, drafting of the initial manuscript, manuscript revision, and publication-related correspondence. NHA contributed to data collection, literature search, and manuscript preparation. SPR contributed to the analysis and interpretation of findings and critical review of the manuscript. MNI contributed to reference verification, substantial editing, and final review of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript and are responsible for their respective contributions.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest—financial or non-financial—that could influence the objectivity of the research, the interpretation of results, the writing, or the publication of the article. The authors conducted the entire research and manuscript preparation process independently, free from personal, institutional, or external influence.

AI Usage Statement

The author used artificial intelligence (AI) to a limited extent to enhance language quality, correct grammar, and assist with manuscript formatting. All results, findings, concepts, ideas, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions are the product of the author's own thinking and intellectual responsibility, not AI output.

The author is fully responsible for the manuscript's accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content.

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