

Ancient History in the Qur'an: Images and Scenes from Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia

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Abstract

This study examines the images and scenes related to ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia in the Qur'an, focusing on the way Qur'anic narratives refer to historical settings, figures, peoples, places, and civilizational features connected with these two regions. The corpus of the study consists of Qur'anic verses associated with ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, including direct references to Egypt and Babylon as well as indirect narrative references linked to the names of figures, rulers, communities, and events. The study adopts a descriptive, analytical, and comparative method: it first identifies and classifies the relevant Qur'anic material, then analyzes its thematic content, and finally compares it with classical historical sources and modern historical and archaeological studies. The main result is that classical and archaeological evidence does not provide detailed confirmation of all Qur'anic stories, events, and figures. However, this evidence does not contradict the broader civilizational environment reflected in the Qur'anic narratives, particularly the centralization of political authority, the role of rivers and agriculture, religious and social complexity, and the advanced urban development of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Keywords: *The Qur'an, ancient history, Egypt, Mesopotamia, classical sources, archaeology.*

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Introduction

The Qur'an is not a historical book in the conventional sense, nor does it present past events according to a continuous chronological order. Rather, it is a book of guidance, legislation, admonition, and moral reflection. Nevertheless, Qur'anic narratives contain numerous references to ancient peoples, places, rulers, events, and civilizational settings. Among the most prominent historical spaces evoked in these narratives are ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, two major centers of the ancient Near East whose political, religious, social, and economic systems played a central role in the history of the region. Ancient.

The importance of this study lies in examining how ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia appear in the Qur'an through images and scenes associated with figures such as Joseph, Moses, Pharaoh, Abraham, Jonah, and others. These references do not aim to construct a detailed historical record; rather, they function within a religious and didactic discourse. Yet they also raise important questions about the relationship between Qur'anic narratives and the broader historical and civilizational environment known from classical sources and modern historical and archaeological studies.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research problem: to what extent do the Qur'anic images and scenes related to ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia intersect with the evidence provided by classical historical sources and modern historical and archaeological research? The corpus of the study consists of Qur'anic verses connected directly or indirectly with ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, including references to places, peoples, rulers, prophetic figures, and events situated within these two geographical and cultural spheres.

Methodologically, the study adopts a descriptive, analytical, and comparative approach. It first identifies and classifies the relevant Qur'anic material, then analyzes its thematic and contextual meanings, and finally compares these images and scenes with selected classical sources, especially Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus,

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and Strabo, as well as with modern historical and archaeological scholarship. This comparison does not seek to treat the Qur'an as a conventional history book, but to examine the degree of correspondence between its narrative environment and the historical features known about ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

The study argues that although classical and archaeological evidence does not provide detailed confirmation of all Qur'anic stories, figures, and events, it does not contradict the general civilizational framework reflected in these narratives. This framework includes the centralization of political authority, the role of rivers and agriculture, complex religious systems, social stratification, and the advanced urban development of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Definition of the Qur'an:

The Qur'an is a term specific to the holy book of Islam, and the Qur'an itself uses this name (in 37 places, including 11 times in Surah Al-Isra alone). In Arabic, the word "Qur'an" is related to the verb "qara'a," which signifies gathering, combining, and reading. Ibn Manzur alluded to this linguistic origin when he linked the word to the meanings of gathering and recitation (Ibn Manzur, 1994, vol. 1, pp. 129–130). Manna' al-Qattan argues that the application of "Qur'an" to the revealed book is connected to the meaning of reading and gathering because the reciter combines letters and words in recitation (al-Qattan, 2000, pp. 15–16).

In its technical sense, the Qur'an is the word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, transmitted through continuous narration, written in the Mushafs (copies of the Qur'an), and whose recitation is considered an act of worship, even if it is just a single chapter (Atr, 1993, pp. 10–12). From this perspective, it is a sacred book that has remained unaltered, even by a single letter. This technical definition is undoubtedly linked to the core beliefs of Muslims.

The West's interest in the Qur'an began early (see Burman, 2007, pp. 15–17), and this interest increased with the Orientalists, who studied it from a critical historical perspective, as a primary source for understanding the call of the Prophet Muhammad and the history of the first Muslim community (Burman, 2007, pp. 1–15). Theodor Nöldeke does not present the Holy Qur'an from the perspective of a doctrinal definition, but rather as a primary source for studying Muhammad's thought and message. He says in this regard: "The more one learns about the best biography of Muhammad, as well as about the pure source of our knowledge of his mind, which is the Qur'an, the more convinced one becomes that Muhammad truly believed in the truth of his message" (Nöldeke et al., 2013, p. 2). Arthur Jeffery also described it as the holy book that Muslims revere and which occupies the status of the foundational text in Islam (Jeffery, 1950).

To be scientifically accurate, we can say that Nöldeke does not offer a conventional definition of the Qur'an like those written by Muslims, but rather provides us with a critical historical description through the scattered statements in the first chapter of his book. His most important direct statement is: "that it is the collection of revelation revealed in the Qur'an, while distinguishing it from other hadiths" (Nöldeke et al., 2013: p. 2). Arthur Jeffery, on the other hand, gives us a direct definition of the Qur'an as: "the holy book that Muslims revere as other religious communities revere their scriptures" (Jeffery, 1950: pp. 41-55).

History in the Qur'an:

If we were to consider, for the sake of argument, that the stories in the Qur'an constitute history, the Qur'an does not present this history as a continuous chronological account of events and occurrences. Although the stories in the Qur'an include the names of individuals, communities, and places, it is clear that the purpose of mentioning them was not to construct detailed biographies of specific figures, provide geographical descriptions of places, or chronicle a civilization. Rather, they are stories for guidance, guidance, admonition, and moral instruction. This explains the repetition of stories, names, and places within an educational and reminder-based framework. The verses of the Qur'an emphasize the value of reflecting on the fate of past nations and drawing lessons from them. These lessons are employed within a discourse structure specific to the Qur'an to highlight divine laws governing human society and the consequences of faith or transgression. (See: Qur'an, 12: 111; Qur'an, 7: 176).

Given the importance and impact of stories on human emotions, verses related to events, characters, deities, and places constitute a significant portion of the Qur'anic verses, estimated by some to be a third of the entire text. It is worth noting that the number of verses in the Qur'an, according to the Warsh recitation of Nafi' using Kufic numbering, is 6236, while the numbering according to the Madani numbering is 6214 like depending on system. This numbering does not affect the content of the verses, as it remains constant in all copies of the Qur'an (Abu Amr al-Dani, 1994 AD, pp. 79–81).

Names of figures in the Qur'an:

The number of figures explicitly and directly mentioned in the Qur'an is 38 (based on the statistical survey conducted in this study), as shown in Table 1. Examining this table reveals that ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia were the settings for events experienced by several of these figures, such as Abraham, Moses, and Joseph (Table 1). This is not limited to the names listed in the table 1, as the Qur'an also refers to figures indirectly, such as the righteous man (Qur'an, 18: 65-82), Moses's servant (Qur'an, 18: 62-63), the Egyptian official (Her master) (Qur'an, 12: 25), Moses' mother (Qur'an, 20: 7, 10, 13; 28: 40), and the official's wife (The wife of Al-'Aziz) (Qur'an, 12: 25, 30, 51), among others. It is not surprising that most of these figures have no historical or archaeological evidence, as the Qur'an's purpose is to encourage reflection on the stories associated with them.

Communities and locations in the Qur'an:

The Qur'an mentions many communities and locations, and we can limit these communities to fourteen communities (based on the statistical survey conducted in this study), see: (Table 2), and most of them (about 93) belong geographically to the Near East region, the field of Qur'anic stories under study, distributed across Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant. Modern studies have proven the historical existence of some peoples such as the Children of Israel (Hasel, 1994), the Quraysh (Qur'an, 106: 1) and the Romans (Byzantines) (Qur'an, 30: 2).

As for the locations, the Qur'an mentions seventeen place names (based on the statistical survey conducted in this study), see: (Table 3), and most of these places still retain those names, such as: Mecca (Qur'an, 48: 24), Hunayn (Qur'an, 9: 25), and Badr (Qur'an, 3: 123). The existence of some of them has been confirmed by historical and archaeological studies, such as Babylon, has been confirmed by historical and archaeological studies (Dalley, 2021), whereas others lack archaeological evidence confirming their existence. It should be noted that the expression "the city" does not refer to the same location in all Qur'anic occurrences, except in four instances (according to the researcher's contextual count) where it means the city of the Prophet Muhammad. In the remaining cases, it refers to various locations that can be identified through their narrative context.

Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia in the Qur'an:

The Qur'an explicitly mentions Egypt in four places: (Qur'an 2: 61; 10: 87; 12: 21, 99), (based on the statistical survey conducted in this study). However, Egypt's presence is not limited to these instances; it appears in many Qur'anic images and scenes, serving as the setting for events related to figures such as Joseph, Moses, Pharaoh, and the Israelites. If these verses are counted within the broader field of Qur'anic narratives, they number approximately 700 (according to the researcher's thematic count of verses related directly or indirectly to Egypt). From this material, several general characteristics can be inferred concerning the social, political, economic, and religious structure of ancient Egypt (Bunbury, 2019; Sabbahy, 2020; Wright, 2014).

On the social level, the story of Joseph reveals the existence of social stratification and the prevalence of slavery, along with the possibility of emancipation and upward mobility in the social, administrative, and even political spheres through individual competence and distinguished service to the state. Examples include Joseph, who reached the pinnacle of the social and political hierarchy, and Qarun, who attained astonishing wealth. The texts also suggest the existence of adoption. On the religious level, the Qur'anic texts highlight the duality of monotheism and idolatry and the conflict between the followers of these two

beliefs. As the story of Moses shows, magic was widespread among the Egyptians and was also used by rulers as a means of imposing authority. Politically, the Qur'anic text presents a clear picture of the centralization and strength of power, embodied in the figure of the tyrannical and despotic ruler (Pharaoh), his control over Egypt's economic resources and wealth, and his enslavement of the population. The Qur'anic narratives also highlight the entry of the Israelites into Egypt, their participation in the machinery of politics and governance at a certain stage, their exposure to injustice and tyranny, and then their exodus from Egypt at another stage (Bunbury, 2019; Sabbahy, 2020; Wright, 2014; Moran, 1992; Hasel, 1994).

By contrast, the terms “Iraq”, “Mesopotamia,” and “the land between the two rivers” are not explicitly mentioned in the Holy Qur'an in these forms. However, references to this region appear through the mention of “Babylon” (Qur'an 2: 102). The Qur'anic evidence related to Mesopotamia consists of direct or indirect allusions connected to the geographical, social, and political environment of that region. This includes stories related to Abraham, Lot, Jonah, Isaac, Ishmael, Idris, and Dhul-Kifl. These figures are generally associated with that geographical area or with adjacent regions (Dalley, 2021; Jotheri et al., 2025).

The number of verses related to Mesopotamia is approximately 310 (according to the researcher's thematic count of verses related directly or indirectly to Iraq/Mesopotamia). They depict diverse themes and are distributed throughout the chapters of the Qur'an. This is less than half the number of verses related to Egypt (according to the same thematic counting criteria). Among the verses that present these images and scenes are those concerning the story of Abraham (Qur'an 2: 124–133, 135, 136, 140; 6: 74–83; 21: 51–71; 19: 41–50; 26: 69–89; 37: 83–99; 29: 16–27). Jonah, who is often associated with the city of Nineveh near Mosul in Mesopotamia, is mentioned in (Qur'an 10: 98; 21: 87–88; 37: 139–148; 68: 48–50). Dhul-Kifl is also mentioned in (Qur'an 21: 85; 38: 48).

Through these allusions, though mostly indirect, a general, although partial, understanding of Mesopotamia can be offered. In the political sphere, these scenes indicate the existence of a strong central authority linked to the religious sphere and integrated with society. They also depict the ruler's despotism and tyranny. On the religious level, they point to the dominance of idol and celestial worship, the alliance between the priesthood and the ruling power, and the deification of rulers. The Qur'an also presents aspects of Mesopotamia's economy, which relied on agriculture and trade and was characterized by the concentration of wealth in the hands of the ruling power and the priests. Furthermore, the Qur'an portrays the advanced urban environment of the region. The Qur'anic narratives also indicate that Mesopotamia possessed considerable knowledge, particularly in astronomy and astrology. From the social aspects, it may be deduced that society was stratified, with kings and priests at the top of the social hierarchy (Jotheri et al., 2025; Dalley, 2021; Diodorus Siculus, 1933; Strabo, 1924). The narratives also reveal an intellectual conflict between idol worshippers and monotheists, who constituted a small and weak community. Among the most important Qur'anic accounts related to Mesopotamia is the story of Noah and the Flood (Qur'an 11: 36–49; 29: 14; 54: 9–15; 23: 23–29; 7: 64; 25: 37; 69: 11). Taken together, these verses provide a detailed picture of the story of the Flood and its stages.

The Qur'an and historical sources:

The events and figures mentioned in the Qur'an are linked to the religious sentiments and beliefs of many peoples in both East and West, especially Jews, Christians, and Muslims. However, classical and archaeological sources do not confirm the existence of most of them, and their treatment in historical studies remains contingent on the nature of the available evidence. They cannot be dismissed simply because historical or archaeological evidence has not been found. At the same time, the Qur'an does not present these events and figures as history in the conventional sense, but rather as lessons from which wisdom may be drawn. The significance of figures, places, and times emerges from the event itself, becoming symbolic. While figures and times may change and the event may recur in one form or another, the essence of the event—injustice, tyranny, faith, tolerance, and similar themes—remains. This enables comparison between past and present and allows lessons to be drawn, which is one of the purposes of studying history (Herodotus, 1920; Diodorus Siculus, 1933; Strabo, 1924).

Classical sources:

Greek and Roman historians wrote about the history and geography of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Among these historians are Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, and Strabo. Herodotus's *Histories* is considered the oldest coherent account of the history of Egypt. He devoted the entire second book (II.1–182) to Egypt, giving information about its geography, the Nile Valley, its borders, and the customs of the Egyptians (II.1–98), and then discussing its kings (II.99–182). He also described Babylon as the most famous and powerful of the Assyrian cities (Herodotus, 1920, 1.178–200; 3.150–160). For Diodorus Siculus, Egypt was the first subject of his *Library of History* (I.10.1–I.98.10). He presented an overview of urban development and its beginnings in Egypt, its kings and their history, religious beliefs and their origins, institutions and laws, and finally the customs of the Egyptians. In doing so, he transformed the history of Egypt from a tale of wonder into a history of civilization. He also discussed the scientific and religious standing of Babylon (Diodorus Siculus, 1933, 2.1–28; 2. 29–31). Strabo, in his *Geography* (XVII.1.1–54), offers a description of Egyptian geography, beginning with the Nile Valley, the Delta, and Alexandria, then discussing the country's natural resources and the influence of geography on the political system. He also described Mesopotamia and its great cities, including Babylon (Strabo, 1924, 16.1.1–5).

Herodotus's book is significant because it relies on personal observations, his knowledge of Egyptian records, and his conversations with priests and the local population. His writings are distinguished by accounts of wonders and by his observations concerning Mesopotamia. Although Diodorus Siculus and Strabo visited Egypt, there is no evidence that they also visited Mesopotamia. From this, it may be argued that classical texts remain an important medium for studying the history of Egypt and Mesopotamia, although modern historical reconstruction relies primarily on archaeological evidence (Bunbury, 2019; Dalley, 2021; Jotheri et al., 2025).

Classical sources agree on the importance of the Nile to Egypt. Herodotus described Egypt as the gift of the river, while Diodorus called the Nile the “soul of the gods.” Herodotus discussed the branching of the Delta and its mouths, as well as human intervention in digging waterways (Herodotus, 1920, 2.5; 2.17–18). Strabo, for his part, gave a precise geographical description of the Nile based on his own observations, noting that the Nile Delta splits at its head and forms the sides of a triangle (Strabo, 1924, 17.1.4). This description corresponds in general terms with the Qur'anic verse spoken on the tongue of Pharaoh: “Is not the kingdom of Egypt mine, and these rivers flowing beneath me?” (Qur'an 43: 51). Thus, the idea that Egypt is a land dependent on waterways is present in both bodies of evidence.

Herodotus provided a description of Egyptian mummification rituals (Herodotus, 1920, 2.86–88), as did Diodorus Siculus (1933, 1.91), which aligns in general terms with the Qur'anic account of the preservation of Pharaoh's body: “So today We will save you in your body” (Qur'an 10: 92). This verse is consistent with the well-established Egyptian practice of preserving bodies, a practice documented in classical sources. Classical sources also relate agriculture in ancient Egypt to the Nile and to royal works involving the digging of canals and the alteration of the Nile's course (Herodotus, 1920, 2.14; 2.99–101). This is consistent with the general character of the verses dealing with drought in Egypt and Pharaoh's ownership of Egypt's water resources (Herodotus, 1920; Bunbury, 2019).

A similar impression can be observed in what classical sources say about Mesopotamia and in their correspondence with what is mentioned in the Qur'an. Herodotus (1920, 1.178–181), Diodorus Siculus (1933, 2.7.3–5; 2.8.1–4; 2.9.1–3), and Strabo (1924, 16.1.16–17) all describe the grandeur of Babylon, the strength of its walls and fortifications, the multitude of its gates, its enormous palaces, and its stepped temples with multiple levels, which housed both religious and secular power. Herodotus (1920, 1.199) also discusses the importance of the temple, while Diodorus Siculus suggests that the temple was not only for worship but also served as an observatory for tracking the stars (Diodorus Siculus, 1933, 2.9.4–9). Astrology was practiced by a specialized community of priests (Strabo, 1924, 16.1.6; 16.1.18).

Historical studies and archaeological sources:

Egypt is one of the world's richest countries in terms of the density of discovered archaeological material (Bunbury, 2019; Sabbahy, 2020), making it a major field of study for specialists and a destination that attracts tourists and adventurers. Modern archaeological studies indicate that ancient Egypt was an agricultural

civilization based on the Nile River, as human settlement and economic production were linked to the river, the exploitation of floodplains, and the development of agricultural patterns over a long period. This is evidenced by studies of land and water in the Nile Valley, as well as archaeobotanical studies of the Nile Delta, which have shown the importance of emmer wheat and barley in the early Egyptian economy (Bunbury, 2019; Marinova et al., 2023). Recent research indicates that grain storage was a fundamental aspect of Egyptian economic and administrative organization. The study of storage facilities is a key entry point for understanding resource management and supply chains in Egypt and Nubia (Bats & Licitra, 2023). In the political sphere, recent studies confirm the early emergence of a centralized state in ancient Egypt, based on strong political and religious monarchical institutions (Sabbahy, 2020; Wright, 2014). Research on mummification and embalming demonstrates that body preservation was a central element of Egyptian funerary culture (Zesch et al., 2024). Archaeological studies do not confirm the existence of figures such as Joseph, Moses, and Haman. However, Egyptian and Near Eastern textual evidence is relevant to the names Pharaoh and Israel, including the Amarna Letters (Moran, 1992, pp. 73–74) and the Merneptah Stele (Hasel, 1994, pp. 45–61). The presence of Israelites in Egypt and the traditions concerning their departure remain debated and require careful evidentiary treatment.

In Mesopotamia, recent archaeological studies show that the southern region was based on an irrigated agricultural economy, thanks to the construction of canals and the control of water distribution. This infrastructure played a fundamental role in human settlement, urban development, and the emergence of political power, as seen in the Eridu region (Jotheri et al., 2025). Furthermore, recent studies confirm that Babylon was one of the greatest political and urban centers in Mesopotamian history, transforming from a simple local town into a powerful center of power (Dalley, 2021). Archaeological studies also confirm that Mesopotamia was scientifically advanced in the fields of medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. Political power was centralized and strong (Bunbury, 2019; Dalley, 2021; Jotheri et al., 2025; Sabbahy, 2020).

Conclusion:

This study leads to several conclusions. The most important is that classical and archaeological sources do not enable us to prove what is mentioned in the Qur'an concerning stories, events, and names related to the history of Egypt and Mesopotamia in terms of the precise details of events, personalities, and their general chronology. On the other hand, these sources do not contradict the general character and environment of the Qur'anic stories; therefore, such stories cannot be denied or refuted on that basis alone.

Conclusion: This study examined the Qur'anic references to ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia by analyzing the verses related to these two regions and comparing their narrative content with selected classical sources and modern historical and archaeological studies. The results show that the Qur'an does not present Egypt and Mesopotamia as subjects of systematic historical narration, but as narrative settings serving religious, moral, and didactic purposes. Egypt is more explicit and textually prominent, appearing by name and through the narratives of Joseph, Moses, Pharaoh, and the Children of Israel. Mesopotamia, by contrast, is less direct and is mainly inferred through Babylon and through narratives associated with Abraham, Lot, Jonah, and Dhul-Kifl.

The comparison does not provide detailed historical verification for all Qur'anic events, figures, or chronological contexts, especially where individual names and specific episodes are concerned. However, it shows that the general civilizational background reflected in these narratives is broadly consistent with what is known about ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, particularly the role of rivers and irrigation, agriculture, centralized authority, social hierarchy, religious institutions, and urban development. Thus, the historical value of the Qur'anic material lies not in offering a documentary record of ancient history, but in preserving narrative images of ancient societies within a theological and moral framework. This calls for a balanced approach that avoids both full historical identification and complete dismissal.

Table (1): the names of the personalities mentioned in the Qur'an

The name	Number	The name	Number	The name	Number
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Moses	136	Adam, Jesus	25	Hud (Eber), Zakariyya	7
Pharaoh	74	Aaron	20	Haman	6
Abraham	69	Solomon	17	Yhya (John)	5
Lot	57	Jacob, Isaac, David	16	Imran	4
Noah	43	Ishmael	12	Ayoub (Job), muhammad, Yunus (Johan), Quarun,	3
Mary	34	Shuaib	11	Enoch, Elisha, Elijah Dhul-Kifl, Talut, Luqman, Tubba	2
Joseph	27	Salih	9	Azar, Uzair, Goliath, Abu Lahab, Ahmad, Zayd.	1

Source: The Qur'an

Table (2): Names of community and peoples in the Qur'an

Group name's	Number	Group name	Number	Group name	Number
The Children of Israel	40	T. p. Pharaoh	13	F. Abraham, t. p. Hūd, t. p. Lot, t. p. Tubba.	2
Thamūd	26	T. p. Noah	10	T. p. Šāliḥ, t. f. 'Imrān, t. f. Ya'qūb, Quraysh, the Byzantines	1
Ād	24				

Source: The Qur'an. t. p. = The people of; t. f. = The family of.

Place names and locations in the Qur'an

Place Name	Number	Place Name	Number
Medina	14	Saba, Tuwa	2
Egypt	5	5 Al-Judi, Babylon, Iram, Mount Sinai and Mount Sinin, Al-Ahqaf, Al-Hijr, Mecca, Bakkah, Yathrib, Hunayn, Badr, As-Safa and Al-Marwa	1

Source: The Qur'an

Table (4): Quranic References

Surah	Surah N°	Surah	Surah N°	Surah	Surah N°	Surah	Surah N°
Al-Baqarah	2	Yusuf	12	al-Furqan	25	Az-Zukhruf	43
Āl 'Imrān	3	al-Isrā'	17	ash-Shu'ara	26	al-Faḥ	48
Al-An'am	6	al-kahf	18	al- Qaṣaṣ	28	Al-Qamar	54
	7	Maryam	19	al-'Ankabut	29	Al-Qalam	68
al-Tawbah	9	Ṭā Hā	20	al-Rūm	30	Al-Haqqah	69
Yunus	10		21	As-Saffat	37	Quraysh	106
Hud	11		23	Sad	38	/	/

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