

Comparative Study of Moses in the Qur'an and the Bible: Narrative Differences, Theological Construction, and Historical Context

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<https://doi.org/10.51214/biis.v5i2.2374>

ABSTRACT

This article compares the narratives of Moses in the Qur'an and the Bible and explores 'thinking beyond the narratives.' Existing comparative studies often focus only on identifying similarities and differences. This research aims to address this gap by asking why such variations and similarities exist and what their theological implications are. Using a qualitative, critical-comparative analysis method that combines narratological, comparative theological, and historical-critical approaches, this study examines key episodes, such as the Golden Calf incident and the drowning of Pharaoh. The results indicate that narrative differences are not random variations but rather theological constructions with significant implications. These differences stem from two fundamental factors: (1) the theological foundations of each sacred text, particularly the concept of prophethood (such as '*Iṣmat al-Anbiyā*' in Islam) and the concept of revelation; and (2) the historical context and intended audience, where the Bible serves as a formative national narrative for the Israelite people, while the Qur'an conveys universal moral messages ('*ibrah*') to a broader audience of the Late Antiquity era.

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received: 09-10-2026

Revised: 21-10-2026

Accepted: 22-10-2026

Keywords:

Bible;
Comparative Studies;
Moses;
Narrative Theology;
Qur'an.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Examining the figure of Moses has significance not only academically but also theologically. This is because in the traditions of the Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam- Moses is the only figure who occupies a central and crucial position. For Judaism, Moses is *Moshe Rabbenu* or "Musa our teacher", a lawgiver and the founder of the Jewish nation. For Christianity, Moses was the prophet who prepared the way for the Messiah. In Islam, Moses is one of the *Ulū al-'Azm* (Prophets with determination) and the most frequently mentioned prophet in the Qur'an; his story is also the longest.¹

Jon D. Levenson, in his comparative study of trilogies, also emphasizes the importance of analyzing the life of Moses because it can open an understanding of the core concepts inherited by the three Abrahamic religions, such as the concept of a covenant between God and humans, the concept of divine revelation in the form of written law, and the paradigm of liberation from oppression.² Cornel West also explains how the story of Moses continues to inspire modern discourses on justice, law, faith, and power.³ Thus, studying the story of Moses is not just studying the biography of a prophet but also tracing the spiritual and ethical source of academic civilization.

¹ Teona Sukhiashvili, "Moses in the Qur'an," *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 20, no. 1 (January 2021): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2020.1832361>.

² Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai & Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013). [Google](#).

³ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, 1st ed (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982). [Google](#).

To gain a deeper understanding of the story of Moses, this study will use a comparative method between the Qur'an and the Bible. Since Max Muller introduced the importance of a comparative approach in religious studies, studies on the story of Moses in the Qur'an and the Bible have also not been exempt from this approach. Wheeler (2006) and Narinskaya (2022) have comprehensively researched the life of Moses using the two sacred texts as objects of analysis.⁴ Reynolds (2018) has also provided a descriptive comparison of the texts of the Qur'an and the Bible, including the story of Prophet Moses.⁵ In addition to descriptive studies, comparative studies have also been conducted by comparing specific events or moments in the story of Moses, such as comparing the stories of the Exodus, childhood and training, Sinai, the character of Moses, etc., as in the research of Wolf (1959), Wheeler (1998), Affani (2017), Sukhiashvili (2020) and Ashraf (2021).⁶

However, of all the existing comparative studies, scholars are still limited to the normative realm, with the aim of seeking a comprehensive understanding or finding similarities and differences. Studies such as examining the reasons behind the differences and similarities in the narratives and structures behind the two scriptures still escape the attention of researchers. Therefore, this essay will fill this gap. Rather than questioning how the differences and similarities between the story of Moses in the Qur'an and the Bible, this study tries to 'think beyond the narratives' by answering the question of why the differences and similarities arise and what the implications are for theological aspects. This paper methodologically challenges the old polemical approach that only focuses on 'borrowing theory' and instead encourages an analysis of how each narrative functions uniquely within its own literary and theological framework, as advocated by scholars such as Angelika Neuwirth who places the Qur'an in a lively dialogue with the traditions of Late Antiquity.

After knowing the reasons behind the differences, it is also important to understand the implications, especially in terms of theology, including the concept of prophetology. According to Reynolds, the narrative variations between the two scriptures have obvious implications; for example, the Qur'anic emphasis on Moses' 'direct dialogue' with God and his human frailty is not simply a difference in detail but a deliberate theological reinterpretation to emphasize core Qur'anic messages such as the concept of *Tawhid* (oneness of God). Thinking beyond narrative thus makes it possible to appreciate how each scripture rhetorically communicates its divine message, which, according to Daniel Madigan, is the key to more authentic and mutually enlightening interfaith dialogue.

Through critical reading and analysis in a comparative format, this study arrives at the argument that although the Qur'an and the Bible share the core narrative of the Prophet Moses, the fundamental differences in the telling are not random variations but rather a representation of deliberate theological and literary constructions. The study also reveals that the differences in characterization, plot, and emphasis in the Moses story are rooted in the theological goals, historical context, and narrative strategies unique to each scripture.

Further "Borrowing theory" and the polemical approach are discussed here as the intellectual background this study departs from, not as its method. Borrowing theory is

⁴ Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Qur'an and Islamic Exegesis*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203037454>; Elena Narinskaya, *The Life of One Chosen by God: A Study of the Stories of Moses in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Sources*, Gorgias Studies in Classical and Late Antiquity 29 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2022). [Google](#).

⁵ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018). [Google](#).

⁶ C. Umhau Wolf, "Moses in Christian and Islamic Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* XXVII, no. 2 (1959): 102–8, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/XXVII.2.102>; Wheeler, *Moses in the Qur'an and Islamic Exegesis*, 0 ed.; Syukron Affani, "Rekonstruksi Kisah Nabi Musa dalam al-Quran: Studi Perbandingan dengan Perjanjian Lama," *Al-Ihkam: Jurnal Hukum & Pranata Sosial* 12, no. 1 (August 2017): 170, <https://doi.org/10.19105/al-ihkam.v12i1.1259>; Sukhiashvili, "Moses in the Qur'an," <https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2020.1832361>.

limited because it explains difference only as deviation from a source and cannot account for how a narrative works in its new setting. Polemical readings are limited because their conclusions are fixed before the comparison begins. This study instead follows Neuwirth, who reads the Qur'an in active dialogue with Late Antique traditions.⁷ on this view, shared material is *reworked* to serve each community's theological concerns. For example, Reynolds⁸ notes the Qur'anic emphasis on Moses' direct dialogue with God and on his human frailty. This can be read as a deliberate reinterpretation that supports the Qur'anic message of *tawhid* rather than as an incidental variation

B. METHODS

This study is qualitative research, with the main approach of comparative critical analysis. The object of this study is the narrative of the story of Moses in the Qur'an and the Bible (especially the Book of Exodus and related texts), focusing on events that show fundamental differences. Five episodes were selected: (1) the killing of the Egyptian and the flight to Madyan, (2) the confrontation with Pharaoh's sorcerer, (3) the crossing of the Red Sea and the death of Pharaoh, and (4) the Golden Calf. They were chosen using four criteria: (a) the episode appears in both scriptures in substantial form; (b) the two accounts differ in at least one of characterization, plot, or emphasis; (c) the episode bears on the doctrine of God or on prophetology; (d) it is narrated in enough detail to support close reading. In addition, this research will also use previous studies that have compared the story of Moses in the Qur'an and the Bible, especially the arguments and research results offered as a starting point and critical discussion material for a more in-depth analysis.

The data collection process was completed by a comprehensive collection of relevant Moses stories from the Qur'an and the Bible, with more focus on stories that show fundamental differences, characterized by the central theological message conveyed by each holy book. After that, the analysis process was carried out in several stages as well: 1) Comparing the narratives of the selected episodes using the narratological approach to find out how the story of Moses is told in each book; 2) Analyzing the factors causing the differences and similarities of the narratives using a combination of comparative theology and historical-critical approaches; 3) Analyzing the theological implications of the differences in the narratives, especially their impact on the formulation of key doctrines such as the nature of God and the concept of prophetology, by referring back to the comparative theology analysis; 4) Drawing conclusions that summarize the research findings regarding the differences, similarities, causal factors and implications of the Moses narratives in the Qur'an and Bible.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Comparative Analysis of the Moses Narrative in Qur'an and Bible

As explained earlier, the comparison of Moses' story is limited to four narratives that have fundamental differences and the most significant theological implications, namely the events of the golden calf, the *killing* of the Egyptians, the confrontation with the sorcerers, and the death of Pharaoh. Gérard Genette offers a narratological analysis that focuses on how a story is explained within a text. Genette distinguishes three narrative levels: story (content or sequence of events), narrative (discourse or the text itself), and narrating (the act of telling), with the primary focus of his analytical framework being the "narrative" level.⁹ In this case,

⁷ Angelika Neuwirth, "Qur'an and History – a Disputed Relationship. Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5, no. 1 (April 2003): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2003.5.1.1>.

⁸ Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible*. Google.

⁹ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, 1. publ., 4. print (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). Google.

the narrative of Moses' story will be analyzed using Genette's framework. At the narrative level, Genette encompasses aspects such as the chronology of the story, the frequency of narration, the narrator, the narrative perspective, and the duration of narration. However, in practice, not all aspects will be used in the analysis; only those relevant to revealing fundamental differences between the narratives in the Qur'an and the Bible will be considered. The following explanation results from comparing the story of Moses as told in the Qur'an and the Bible and analyzing their differences.

2. The Story of the Golden Calf

According to the Bible in the book of Exodus, when the Israelites saw that Moses was not coming down from Mount Sinai, they became restless (Exodus 32:1). They gathered around Aaron. They said, "Make us gods who will go before us" (Exodus 32:1). Aaron then instructed them to hand over their gold earrings, which he received and melted down to form a cast image of a calf (Exodus 32:2-4). Once the image was complete, the Israelites declared, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt!" (Exodus 32:4). Seeing this, Aaron set up an altar before the statue and announced that there would be a festival for the Lord the next day (Exodus 32:5). On that day, they offered burnt offerings, ate and drank, and rejoiced (Exodus 32:6). The Lord saw their actions and His anger arose, so He told Moses to come down because the people had become corrupt. He intended to destroy them (Exodus 32:7-10). However, Moses successfully pleaded with the Lord not to carry out His anger, so the Lord relented from the disaster He had planned (Exodus 32:11-14). When Moses came down and saw the calf idol and the people dancing, his anger flared up. He smashed the two stone tablets in his hands until they broke (Exodus 32:19). He took the calf, burned it in the fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it (Exodus 32:20). Moses then called out to anyone who sided with the Lord. All the Levites gathered around him (Exodus 32:26). At Moses' command, the Levites punished the offenders by killing about three thousand of the people that day (Exodus 32:27-28). After that, the Lord brought a plague upon the people because they had worshiped the calf Aaron had made (Exodus 32:35).¹⁰

In the Qur'an, it is narrated that Allah tested the Children of Israel after the departure of Prophet Moses, who went to meet Him on Mount Sinai (Thaha [20]: 85). One of them, named Samiri, then went out and misled his people (Thaha [20]: 85). He instructed them to gather gold jewelry, and from the melted gold, he fashioned a calf statue that could make sounds (Al-A'raf [7]: 148; Thaha [20]: 87-88). Samiri then said to the Children of Israel, "This is your god and the god of Moses, but he (Moses) has forgotten" (Thaha [20]: 88). Prophet Aaron, who had been entrusted with leadership, had previously warned them sternly, "O my people! You are only being tested with this (idol), and indeed, your Lord is the Most Merciful, so follow me and obey my command" (Thaha [20]: 90). However, they refused and said, "We will not abandon it (continue to worship it) until Moses returns to us" (Thaha [20]: 91). When Moses returned to his people, he was outraged and sad (Thaha [20]: 86). He then grabbed his brother Aaron by the head and beard. In response to Moses' action, Aaron pleaded, "O son of my mother! Do not seize my beard or my head. I am terrified that you will say to me, 'You have caused division among the Children of Israel, and you have not upheld my trust'" (Thaha [20]: 94). Aaron also explained that his people had considered him weak and had almost killed him (Al-A'raf [7]: 150). Moses then confronted Samiri, who admitted to having committed the act out of his desires (Thaha [20]: 95-96). As punishment, Moses expelled Samiri and declared that the calf statue would be burned. Its ashes scattered into the sea (Thaha [20]: 97). After realizing their fault, the Israelites deeply regretted their actions and prayed, "Indeed, if our Lord does not show mercy to us and forgive us, we will surely be among the losers" (Al-A'raf [7]: 149).¹¹

¹⁰ Christian Standard Bible, *The Holy Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee.: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017). [Google](#).

¹¹ Al-Qur'an. [Google](#).

For comparison, in Exodus 32 the narrative of the Golden Calf is presented as a complete and chronological tragic drama. Unlike the linear narrative of the Bible, the Qur'an presents this story in fragments across several surahs. The essence and chronology of the story are essentially the same as those in the Bible narrative. Still, there are some differences, such as the details of conversations and the appearance of the character as-Samiri. The Qur'an fundamentally alters the dynamics by introducing the character of as-Samiri as the main instigator who created the speaking calf statue (*lahu khuwār*) to mislead his people (Thaha [20]: 85-98). As a result, Aaron is no longer the maker of the statue but a leader who tried to prevent idolatry yet was threatened with death by his people, as evidenced by his defense of Moses (al-A'raf [7]: 150). Another reference in al-Baqarah [2] serves to remind the Children of Israel of their breach of the covenant and the severity of the conditions required for repentance.

The characterization of Aaron is the most significant difference in the telling of the golden calf story between the Qur'an and the Bible. By introducing Samiri, Qur'an takes a "polemical step" by freeing Aaron from the portrayal of someone who has misled his followers. Related to this, Brannon Wheeler said that Islamic interpretations consistently portray Aaron as a helpless victim, a narrative that is very important for maintaining the doctrine of the infallibility of prophets (*ishmah*).¹² Robert Totolli noted this change as a restoration process of the prophet's stories to their original meaning, triggered by the belief that the Biblical narrative has been distorted.¹³ From these differences, it can be understood that the story of the golden calf in the Bible, told chronologically, is to emphasize the collective failure of the Israelites and the weakness of Aaron's leadership. Otherwise, in the Qur'an, with its fragmented narrative, the focus is on moral lessons.

3. Killed an Egyptian

According to the Bible, one day after Moses had grown up, he went to visit his Hebrew brothers. He saw an Egyptian beating one of them (Exodus 2:11). After looking to the right and left and seeing no one else around, he killed the Egyptian. He hid his body in the sand (Exodus 2:12). According to Stephen's account, Moses was forty years old at the time and acted to defend and avenge his oppressed brother (Acts 7:23-24). Stephen added details about Moses' motivation, stating, "Moses thought that his brothers would understand that God was using him to save them, but they did not understand" (Acts 7:25). The next day, Moses found two Hebrews fighting and tried to separate them (Acts 7:26). However, the guilty party rejected him. It said, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you intend to kill me, just as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?" (Acts 7:27-28). Hearing his words, Moses became afraid because his actions had been discovered, which then prompted him to flee from Pharaoh and settle in the land of Midian (Exodus 2:14-15).¹⁴

According to the Qur'an, Prophet Moses entered a city when its inhabitants were unaware (verse 15). There, he found two men fighting: one from his people (the Israelites) and the other from his enemies (the Egyptians). The Israelites asked Moses for help, so Moses struck the Egyptian, killing him instantly (verse 15). Immediately afterward, Moses regretted his actions and said, "This is the work of the devil," acknowledging that the devil is the deceiving enemy (verse 15). He immediately prayed for forgiveness, saying, "O my Lord, indeed I have wronged myself, so forgive me." Then Allah forgave him (verse 16). Moses then vowed, "By the grace You have bestowed upon me, I will not be an ally to those who sin" (verse 17). The next day, as he walked through the city with anxiety and caution, the same

¹² Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis* (New York: Psychology Press, 2002). [Google](#).

¹³ Roberto Totolli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*, Routledge Studies in the Qur'an (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013). [Google](#).

¹⁴ Bible. [Google](#).

man from the Israelites called out to him again, asking for help in a new fight (verse 18). Moses rebuked him, but when he was about to strike his latest opponent, the Israelite—out of fear—shouted, “O Moses, do you intend to kill me, as you killed a man yesterday?” (verse 19). These words exposed Moses' actions. Shortly thereafter, a man came running from the edge of the city to warn Moses that the city officials were plotting to kill him and advised him to flee immediately (verse 20). So Moses left the city in fear and caution, praying, “O my Lord, save me from these unjust people” (verse 21).¹⁵

For comparison, in Exodus the narrative of this murder is presented as a cold and calculated event. After Moses witnessed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, his following action was significant: “After looking left and right and seeing no one, he struck the Egyptian dead and hid him in the sand.” The phrase “looking left and right” is often interpreted as a calculated action to ensure there were no witnesses rather than a mere impulsive reaction.¹⁶ The moral ambiguity of this action gives rise to a long tradition of exegesis in both Judaism and Christianity aimed at justifying it. In the Acts of the Apostles, Stefanus reinterprets this event as a conscious act of a rejected liberator who “thought his people would understand that God would give them liberation through him.”¹⁷ Jewish-Hellenistic writers such as Philo and Artapanus went further by describing the killing as a “just act” against a cruel overseer or as a form of legitimate self-defense, thereby effectively removing the moral stain from Moses' actions. Thus, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the killing is framed as an act of retributive justice—albeit a problematic one—that triggers Moses' role as leader and liberator.

In contrast to the biblical narrative, the Qur'an presents this story as a spiritual drama. Moses' action is described as an unintentional, spontaneous reaction—he “punched” him with fatal consequences. The focus of the Qur'anic narrative is not on the concealment of the body but on Moses' immediate inner turmoil. He was immediately filled with deep regret, saying, “This is the work of Satan,” and immediately prayed, “My Lord, I have wronged myself, so forgive me.” God's response was immediate and personal: “So He (Allah) forgave him.” In the Qur'an, this story is not presented as the beginning of a political mission but rather as a tragic mistake that becomes a spiritual turning point. Qur'an presents Moses as a sinful but immediately repentant figure. This indicates the prototype understanding of the concept of prophethood in Islam: a human being who can do wrong but whose greatness lies precisely in his ability to return to God.¹⁸

Thus, the most significant difference between the two narratives lies in their theological perspective and purpose. The ambiguous biblical narrative gives rise to the need for interpretive justification to maintain Moses' image as a hero. In contrast, the Qur'an takes a “polemical step” by explicitly categorizing the act as a sin, as Reynolds highlights how the Qur'an often revises biblical narratives to affirm its theological claims.¹⁹ In this case, the Qur'an shifts the focus from justifying violence to the importance of repentance and articulates that Moses' actions were not premeditated but rather a mistake triggered by anger (“the work of the devil”) and necessitating immediate repentance.

4. Confrontation with Sorcerers of Pharaoh

Narration in the Bible starts with God speaking to Moses and Aaron, preparing them to face Pharaoh, who would demand a miracle (verses 8-9). The Lord commanded Aaron to throw his staff before Pharaoh, and it would become a serpent (verse 9). Moses and Aaron

¹⁵ Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*. Google.

¹⁶ Leivy Smolar and Moses Aberbach, “The Golden Calf Episode In Postbiblical Literature,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 39 (1968): 91. <https://ixtheo.de/Record/1766783570>

¹⁷ Wolf, “Moses in Christian and Islamic Tradition.” <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/XXVII.2.102>;

¹⁸ Fred Miller, “Prophecy in Judaism and Islam,” *Islamic Studies* 17, no. 1 (1978): 27–44. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20847058>

¹⁹ The term “polemical move” is used to describe how a text consciously revises a previous narrative to assert its own theological position.

went before Pharaoh and did as the Lord had commanded; Aaron threw down his staff, and it became a serpent (verse 10). In response, Pharaoh summoned his wise men and sorcerers, and they, the Egyptian magicians, did the same with their enchantments (verse 11). Each of them threw down his staff, and the staff became snakes (verse 12). However, the narrative reaches its climax when Aaron's staff swallows their staff (verse 12). Nevertheless, Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he refused to listen to Moses and Aaron, as the Lord had previously foretold (verse 13).²⁰

The narrative in the Qur'an begins with Moses approaching Pharaoh, declaring himself as a Messenger from the Lord of the universe, and demonstrating two major miracles (Al-A'raf [7]: 104-106). He threw down his staff, which instantly turned into a large, visible serpent (*syu'ban al-mubin*), and he extended his hand, which became white and radiant (Al-A'raf [7]: 107-108; Taha [20]: 20-22; Asy-Syu'ara [26]: 32-33). Pharaoh and his nobles accused Moses of being a skilled sorcerer who sought to seize power (Al-A'raf [7]: 109-110). Thus, they challenged Moses to a contest on a designated festival day, where everyone could gather and witness (Taha [20]: 58-59). Pharaoh gathered all the greatest magicians from across the land, promising them great rewards and honorable positions if they won (Al-A'raf [7]: 113-114; Asy-Syu'ara [26]: 41-42).²¹

On the day of the contest, the magicians began first, throwing their ropes and staffs, which, due to their magic, appeared to be snakes slithering, creating a grand and terrifying illusion (Taha [20]: 66; Al-A'raf [7]: 116). Moses felt a moment of fear, but Allah revealed to him, "Do not fear! Indeed, you are the one who is superior" (Taha [20]: 67-68). Moses then threw his staff, which immediately swallowed up all the falsehoods created by the magicians (Taha [20]: 69; Asy-Syu'ara [26]: 45). Witnessing this, the magicians—who knew the difference between magic and divine miracles—immediately fell prostrate and bowed down (Al-A'raf [7]: 120). They declared loudly, "We believe in the Lord of the worlds, (that is) the Lord of Moses and Aaron" (Taha [7]: 70; Asy-Syu'ara [26]: 47-48). Pharaoh was furious and accused them of conspiring with Moses (Al-A'raf [7]: 123). He threatened to torture them cruelly, cutting off their hands and feet alternately and crucifying them at the base of palm trees (Taha [20]: 71; Al-A'raf [7]: 124). However, the magicians, whose faith was firm, replied that they preferred the reward from their Lord. They were not afraid of worldly torture and prayed, "O our Lord, grant us patience and cause us to die in submission (to You)" (Al-A'raf [7]: 125-126; Taha [20]: 72-73).²²

Although the narrative of the story shares the same core narrative—the clash between divine miracles and human sorcery—the two sacred texts present it with significantly different focuses, details, and narrative purposes. In the Bible, the narrative is presented concisely and serves as an introduction to the series of ten plagues. In the Bible, the narratives emphasize the superiority of God's power, as demonstrated when Aaron's staff swallowed all the magicians' staffs. This event, in a biblical context, was a clear demonstration of Yahweh's power over the Egyptian gods represented by magic.²³ The focus was on a display of divine power, in which the magicians were merely figures whose role was limited to being defeated in order to prove the superiority of the God of Israel. The ultimate result was the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, which became the narrative trigger for the subsequent disasters.

In contrast, the Qur'an presents this story as a complete dramatic episode, rich in dialogue and laden with psychological and theological content. The Qur'anic narrative does not focus solely on displays of power but on the transformative power of faith (*iman*). Pharaoh, portrayed as a political tyrant, accuses Moses of being a power-hungry sorcerer and initiates a public contest on a holiday to humiliate him. The magicians who were explicitly

²⁰ Bible. [Google](#).

²¹ Qur'an. [Google](#).

²² Qur'an. [Google](#).

²³ Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible*. [Google](#).

gathered were motivated by worldly rewards (QS As-Syu'ara: 41), emphasizing their professional expertise over their religious affiliation.²⁴ The moment when their magic, described as "ropes and staffs" that seemed to crawl (QS Taha: 66), caused Moses to feel afraid (QS Taha: 67). This moment of doubt made Moses' character more human and dynamic before he was ultimately strengthened again by God's revelation.²⁵

The climax of the Qur'anic narrative is not when Moses' staff swallows the illusion of magic, but what happens afterward: the magicians, realizing that Moses' power is not magic, immediately prostrate themselves and declare their faith in "the Lord of the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron" (QS Al-A'raf: 121-122). This indicates the transformation of character from professionals seeking profit to becoming heroes of faith. Their character development does not stop there. When faced with the threat of Pharaoh's wrath—who accused them of conspiring and threatened them with brutal torture by crucifixion (QS Taha: 71)—they demonstrated extraordinary moral courage. They firmly rejected Pharaoh's threats, declaring that they preferred God's reward over worldly life.²⁶

Thus, the fundamental difference between the telling of this story in the Qur'an and the Bible lies in the characterization of the characters. In the Bible, the sorcerers or magicians are flat, anonymous characters. Also in post-biblical Jewish tradition, they are sometimes given names, such as Jannes and Jambres, but their role remains as opponents of Moses.²⁷ In contrast, the Qur'an develops them into entirely different characters because of their *iman* transformation. Furthermore, in the Bible, Pharaoh is described as a "hard-hearted" figure, a condition often associated with God's actions to demonstrate His power. In the Qur'an, however, he is a tyrant (*tāghūt*) who is arrogant, political, and brutal, whose rejection stems from arrogance and fear of losing power.

5. The Death of Pharaoh

According to the Bible, after all the Israelites had crossed the sea on dry ground, the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may return and cover the Egyptians, their chariots, and their horsemen" (verse 26). Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and as morning approached, the sea returned to its place, while the Egyptians fled toward it; then the Lord hurled the Egyptians into the midst of the sea (verse 27). The water returned and covered the chariots and horse riders of the entire army of Pharaoh that had pursued the Israelites into the sea. The biblical narrative unequivocally concludes, "Not one of them was left alive" (verse 28).²⁸

According to the Qur'an, after Moses and the Israelites fled, Pharaoh and his army pursued them and caught up with them at the edge of the sea at dawn (Asy-Syu'ara [26]: 60). The people of Moses became terrified and said, "We will surely be overtaken!" (Asy-Syu'ara [26]: 61). However, Moses replied with complete confidence, "By no means will we be overtaken; indeed, my Lord is with me, and He will guide me" (Asy-Syu'ara [26]: 62). Allah then commanded Moses to strike the sea with his staff, and the sea split apart, each part like a great mountain (Asy-Syu'ara [26]: 63). Allah saved Moses and the Children of Israel, then drowned Pharaoh and all his followers as they attempted to cross (Al-Baqarah [2]: 50; Asy-Syu'ara [26]: 65-66). The Qur'anic narrative then provides specific details about Pharaoh's final moments. When Pharaoh realized he was about to drown, he cried out, "I believe that there is no god but the God whom the Children of Israel believe in, and I am among those who

²⁴ Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Qur'an and Islamic Exegesis* (London: Routledge, 2013). [Google](#).

²⁵ Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*. [Google](#).

²⁶ John Kaltner and Younus Y. Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition*, 1st ed. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567666048>.

²⁷ Elena Narinskaya, *The Life of One Chosen by God: A Study of the Stories of Moses in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Sources* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463244262>.

²⁸ Bible. [Google](#).

submit (Muslim)" (Yunus [10]: 90). However, Allah rejected his belated faith with His words, "Is it now (that you believe), even though you have been disobedient since long ago, and you are among those who cause corruption?" (Yunus [10]: 91). Nevertheless, Allah granted a unique fate to his body by saying, "So today We will save your body so that you may become a lesson for those who come after you" (Yunus [10]: 92).²⁹

In comparison, in the Bible, specifically Exodus 14:26-28, the narrative of Pharaoh's drowning is presented as a swift and definitive conclusion to the drama of liberation. At God's command, Moses stretched out his hand, and the sea returned to engulf the entire Egyptian army, including their chariots and horsemen, "not one of them remained alive."³⁰ This event, within the biblical framework, is the final and undeniable demonstration of Yahweh's power. The focus is on the total salvific act for His chosen people and the total annihilation of their enemies. The Egyptian soldiers, including Pharaoh, function as the collective object of divine wrath; there is no room for dialogue, repentance, or individual fate. The result is the strengthening of the Israelites' faith as they "saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore" (Exodus 14:30), fulfilling God's promise of liberation.

Otherwise, the Qur'an presents this event as a theologically rich episode filled with psychological depth. The Qur'anic narrative does not merely focus on what happened but on what was said and thought during the most critical moments. Instead of ending with a silent annihilation, the Qur'an slows down time to capture the moment when Pharaoh, on the brink of death, cries out, "I believe that there is no god but the God believed in by the Children of Israel, and I am among those who submit."³¹ This belated moment of confession becomes the focal point of the narrative, shifting the emphasis from military victory to a lesson about the nature of faith and the deadline for repentance.³²

The climax of the Qur'anic narrative is not when the water engulfs Pharaoh, but in the divine response that follows: "Is it now (that you believe), when you have been disobedient since long ago...?" Here, the drama shifts from the earthly stage to the divine court. A unique proclamation then follows Pharaoh's rejection of faith in the Qur'an: "So today, We will save your body so that you may become a lesson for those who come after you."³³ The narrative transformation is complete: Pharaoh, from an enemy who must be destroyed, becomes a "sign" (*ayah*) who must be preserved as an eternal lesson. This divine steadfastness and rejection is at the heart of the moral message in the Qur'anic version of the story, a doctrine which, according to Gabriel Said Reynolds, explicitly states that God does not accept repentance made on the brink of death.³⁴

Then, in summary, two fundamental differences between this narrative in the Qur'an and the Bible are in the characterization of Pharaoh and the story's final resolution. Regarding characterization, in the Bible, Pharaoh is portrayed as a "hard-hearted" figure, a condition often associated with God's actions to demonstrate His power. He is a representation of resistance that must be broken. In the Qur'an, however, he is a tyrant (*taghut*) whose arrogance is the primary source of his rejection, making him the archetype of an oppressive leader.³⁵ By giving him a voice and a moment of rejected repentance, the Qur'an develops his character into a case study of human arrogance.

Another aspect, and most significantly, is the difference in the story's ending. The biblical narrative reaches a definitive conclusion and emphasizes historical events, such as the total annihilation of the enemy and the physical salvation of the Israelites, who see the

²⁹ Qur'an. [Google](#).

³⁰ Bible. [Google](#).

³¹ Qur'an. [Google](#).

³² Betül Avcı, "The Qur'ānic View of History, Revelation, and Prophethood: An Exercise in Comparative Theology," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 56, no. 4 (2021): 535–61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2021.0039>.

³³ Qur'an. [Google](#).

³⁴ Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible*. [Google](#).

³⁵ Reynolds. [Google](#).

corpses of their enemies on the shore as proof of victory. In contrast, the ending of the story in the Qur'an transcends physical events. The climax is not the drowning itself but the failed dialogue of repentance and the divine proclamation that transforms Pharaoh from a destroyed enemy into a "sign" (*ayah*) whose body is preserved as an eternal lesson for future generations.³⁶ The Qur'anic ending is thus open-ended and didactic, transforming the historical conclusion into a moral monument that continues to speak.

6. Why the Narratives Are Different? Factors and Implication

The stories of Prophet Moses hold a central position in both the Qur'an and the Bible. Although both often recount the same core events—the confrontation with Pharaoh, the Exodus from Egypt, and the incident of the Golden Calf—the manner of narration, including details, focus, and even the narrative structure, reveals significant differences. These differences are not coincidental or historical errors but rather logical and profound consequences of the fundamental pillars that distinguish these two traditions. This section will then shift from merely comparing the content of the stories to analyzing *why* the stories must differ. Two fundamental factors contribute to the differences in the narratives of Moses in the Qur'an and the Bible: theological foundation and the context of the audience for each book. The following part will explain this concept.

a. Theological Aspect

The primary driver behind the narrative differences is the need for each text to align with and serve the theological framework (*aqidah*) of its respective religion. Two theological aspects that underlie these stories are the nature of prophethood and the concept of revelation. First, the concept of prophethood in classical Islamic theology, known as '*Iṣmat al-Anbiyā'*' (the infallibility of prophets), asserts that prophets sent by God are protected (*ma'sūm*) from major sins and from fatal errors in conveying His message.³⁷ This doctrine, which is a consensus among Islamic theologians, directly reshapes narratives in which prophetic figures in the Bible are depicted as committing serious errors. A notable example is the narrative of the Golden Calf. In the narrative of Exodus 32, Aaron is depicted as a weak figure who succumbs to mass pressure and actively creates an idol.³⁸ From an Islamic theological perspective, this depiction is unacceptable for a prophet. As a result, the Qur'anic narrative (Surah Taha [20]: 85-94) theologically had to "revise" this narrative by introducing another character, Samiri, as the main instigator.³⁹ To preserve the sanctity of a prophet's figure and fulfil a doctrinal necessity, the Qur'an changed Aaron's role as a hero who opposed idolatry to the point of nearly being killed by his people.⁴⁰ In contrast, the Bible consistently portrays its leaders, even the greatest ones like Moses and David, as humans who can fall into sin.⁴¹ The purpose is not to belittle them but to underscore the theological theme of human frailty and the need for God's grace and forgiveness.⁴²

The second concept that affects the narrative difference is the concept of revelation. The Qur'an presents itself as *Tanzil*, meaning the literal revelation of God's word, which was

³⁶ Maurice Bucaille, *Moses and Pharaoh in the Bible, Quran and History*, Malaysian ed (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2008). [Google](#).

³⁷ Mahsheed Ansari, *Modern Debates on Prophecy and Prophethood in Islam: Muhammad Iqbal & Said Nursi*, Routledge Studies in Religion (New York: Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003275848>.

³⁸ Eksodus 32:4. [Google](#).

³⁹ Taha [20]: 80. [Google](#).

⁴⁰ Al-A'raf [7]: 50. [Google](#).

⁴¹ Mordecai Schreiber, "Rethinking Prophecy," *Tikkun* 28, no. 3 (August 2013): 13–17, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08879982-2307121>.

⁴² Alan Brill, "Islam: Scripture, Prophecy, and Piety," in *Judaism and World Religions*, by Alan Brill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2012), 145–75, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137013187_6.

revealed in Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad.⁴³ Consequently, the Qur'an functions as Muhaymin— “the guardian and test” or “corrector”—of previous scriptures (Al-Ma'idah [5]: 48). This position gives the Qur'anic narrative the authority to clarify, correct, or complete existing stories. An example is the story of Pharaoh's drowning. While Exodus 14:28 merely records destruction, Surah Yunus [10]: 90-92 adds dramatic details about Pharaoh's confession of faith in his final moments and God's response rejecting his belated repentance yet saving his body as a “sign” or lesson (*ayah*). On the other hand, scholars of Biblical Studies view the composition of the Torah as a complex editorial process from various traditional sources (such as Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly) over centuries. the purpose was to compile and preserve the history and laws of the Israelite people, not to correct other texts.

b. Historical Context and Audience

Generally, every narrative is crafted for a specific audience with a unique communicative purpose, including the Qur'an and the Bible, which God reveals to specific people and in a specific context. In this case, The Book of Exodus, along with the other narratives of the Pentateuch, was written and compiled for the ancient Israelites. Its purpose was formative, namely, to build and strengthen their national and religious identity as God's chosen people bound by a special covenant with Him.⁴⁴ The history presented is not history in the modern sense, but rather a Heilsgeschichte (history of salvation)—a theological narrative about God's salvific actions in the past that define who they are in the present. As explained by historians such as Christian Frevel, the biblical narrative must be analyzed as traditional literature whose primary purpose was to shape the identity of the community at the time of its writing, especially during the post-Babylonian exile period.⁴⁵

Therefore, the Exodus narrative places a strong emphasis on events that define the nation, such as the liberation from slavery, the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, and the establishment of the priesthood. Details such as genealogies, territorial boundaries, and agrarian laws became very important because they served to legitimize the Israelites' claim to the land of Canaan and to regulate their communal life. These stories were their “history of salvation,” which distinguished them from “other nations.” Niels Peter Lemche even argues that “Biblical Israel” itself is a literary creation, an “invention” that served to create a collective identity for the Judean community in later periods. The narrative of the Exodus from Egypt, in this framework, becomes an essential foundation myth.⁴⁶

This has implications for the doctrine of prophecy in Judaism. Moses is not only seen as a prophet but as a unique Prophet-Lawgiver and National Leader. His position is *sui generis* (one of a kind). Prophecy in the Jewish tradition, as depicted in the Bible, is closely tied to the fate and history of Israel. A prophet speaks to and for the people of Israel. His function is to call the nation back to the Sinai covenant mediated by Moses. Thus, prophecy becomes a historical phenomenon specific to Israel, with Moses as its unrepeatable paradigm.⁴⁷

In contrast, the Qur'an was revealed in the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century, an environment that modern scholars refer to as the Late Antique context. Its audience was diverse and already very familiar with the stories of the Bible and the Jewish and Christian

⁴³ Eldar Hasanov, “Yahudilikte Peygamberlik ve Peygamberler,” *İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi* 3, no. 4 (November 2014): 676–95, <https://doi.org/10.15869/itobiad.79806>.

⁴⁴ John Barton, *A History of the Bible: The Story of the World's Most Influential Book* (New York: Viking, 2019). 35-37. [Google](#).

⁴⁵ Christian Frevel, *History of Ancient Israel*, Archaeology and Biblical Studies, number 32 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023). 1-6, 75-76. [Google](#).

⁴⁶ Niels Lemche, *Israelites in History and Tradition* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998)., 129, 165-167. [Google](#).

⁴⁷ David DeJong, *A Prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15, 18): The Origin, History, and Influence of the Mosaic Prophetic Succession* (BRILL, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004522022>.

interpretive traditions surrounding them.⁴⁸ The purpose of the Qur'anic narrative was not to write the history of a nation but to proclaim a universal message of *tawhid* in an intense dialogue with existing traditions. The stories of previous prophets, including Moses (Musa), were used as *'ibrah*—a lesson, warning, and universal moral proof—to reinforce the central message of the oneness of God.⁴⁹

This explains why the Qur'anic narrative often omits or assumes details that are locational or genealogical and important to the national identity of Israel. As Gabriel Said Reynolds observes, the Qur'an frequently engages with biblical tradition, but it selects and rearranges the material for its own rhetorical and theological purposes.⁵⁰ The Qur'an is not interested in the chronicles of Israel's history but instead in the eternal relevance of the prophets' struggles. The story of Moses killing the Egyptian, for example, in Surah Al-Qasas [28]: 15-21, is no longer an episode in the biography of a national leader but a deep case study of human weakness, sincere repentance, prayer, and divine forgiveness. The focus shifts from the collective history of a nation to the spiritual dilemma of the individual before God.

This also applies to the concept of prophethood in Islam. First, universal prophethood. Moses is no longer solely the Prophet of the Israelites; he is part of a long chain of universal prophethood carrying the same message. As noted in the article "Prophethood in the Abrahamic Faiths," Islam recognizes all prophets as bearers of the message of monotheism.⁵¹ Moses becomes the paradigmatic prototype of a prophet, and his struggle against Pharaoh becomes a metaphor (*mathal*) for the Prophet Muhammad's struggle against the Quraish. Second, this allows for the formulation of the doctrine of *Khātam al-Nabiyyīn* (Seal of the Prophets).⁵² If prophethood is a universal institution with the same message in every age, then it is logical that there should be a final prophet whose mission is to summarize and perfect the entire prophetic tradition for all of humanity. Thus, the Qur'anic narrative about Moses does not merely retell a story but also places it within a new theological framework that supports the universality and finality of the Islamic message.

D. CONCLUSION

In summary, this article concludes that the narrative differences are not historical contradictions but rather representations of theological constructs with specific purposes. These differences and similarities stem from two fundamental pillars. The first is the theological framework underlying the Qur'an and Bible. In Islamic tradition, the doctrine of *'Iṣmat al-Anbiyā'* (the infallibility of prophets from major sins) necessitates a retelling that safeguards prophetic figures like Aaron from fatal errors, as exemplified by the introduction of the character of Samiri in the story of the Golden Calf. Otherwise, in biblical tradition, depicting the weaknesses of its leaders aims to emphasize human frailty and the need for God's mercy. Additionally, the Qur'an's position as *Muḥaymin* (the guardian and corrector of previous scriptures) grants it the authority to revise or add details—such as Pharaoh's rejected confession of faith at the moment of death—to convey specific theological lessons. The second factor is the historical context and intended audience. The Bible narrative,

⁴⁸ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān (London New York: Routledge, 2008).1-5. [Google](#).

⁴⁹ Affani, "Rekonstruksi Kisah Nabi Musa dalam al-Quran." <https://doi.org/10.19105/al-ihkam.v12i1.1259>;

⁵⁰ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012). [Google](#).

⁵¹ Abbas Ali Raza, Ahmad Fuzail Ibn Saeed, and Khadija tul Kubra, "Prophethood in the Abrahamic Faiths: A Comparative Study of the Divine Missions and Moral Teachings of Moses (AS), Jesus (AS), and Muhammad (PBUH)," *Islamic Research Journal* 2, no. 04 (December 2024): 126–33. <https://www.al-qudwah.com/index.php/aqrj/article/view/62>

⁵² Mahsheed Ansari, *Modern Debates on Prophecy and Prophethood in Islam: Muhammad Iqbal and Said Nursi* (London: Routledge, 2023), 31, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003275848>.

particularly the Book of Exodus, was composed as Heilsgeschichte (salvation history) to shape the national and religious identity of the Israelites as God's chosen people. The focus is on events that define the nation, such as liberation, the giving of the law, and the legitimization of the promised land. In contrast, the Qur'an was revealed to a more diverse audience in the Late Antiquity era and uses the story of Moses not as a chronicle of the nation's history but as an *'ibrah* (universal moral lesson) to emphasize the message of *tawhid*. The theological implications of this difference are significant. In the Jewish-Christian tradition, Moses is a unique and central prophet-lawgiver in the history of Israel's salvation. In Islam, Moses is a great prophet of all *'Azmi*, but he is also part of a universal chain of prophethood that carries the same message, culminating in the Prophet Muhammad. Thus, the Qur'anic narrative about Moses not only affirms his prophethood but also places him within a framework that supports the universality and finality of the Islamic message (*khātam al-Nabiyyīn*). Ultimately, each sacred text tells Moses's story in a unique way to serve its theological vision.

E. DECLARATIONS

1. Author Contribution

Muhammad Najib: Conceptualization, methodology, research, data collection, formal analysis, interpretation of findings, writing the initial draft, visualization, and review and editing of the manuscript. **Rofiqoh Nurul Ashfiya:** Methodology, research, data collection, formal analysis, and data curation, validation, interpretation of findings, and manuscript review and editing. **Ali Ja'far:** Supervision, conceptual input, validation, interpretation of findings, and critical review and editing of the manuscript.

2. Funding Statement

This research received no external funding from government agencies, commercial organizations, private institutions, or other funding bodies. The authors conducted the study using their own institutional and research resources.

3. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no financial, professional, personal, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the study's design, conduct, analysis, interpretation, or reporting.

4. Declaration of AI Use

The authors used ChatGPT in a limited supporting role during manuscript preparation, primarily for language refinement, improved academic expression, editorial assistance, and initial identification of potentially relevant literature. The authors independently verified all references, arguments, interpretations, and factual information included in the manuscript. Artificial intelligence was not used to generate research data, replace field observations or interviews, autonomously interpret participants' accounts, or make research decisions. The authors take full responsibility for the manuscript's accuracy, originality, academic integrity, analysis, interpretation, and final content.

5. Additional Information

Not applicable.

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