

THE USE OF THE TERM "PHARAOH" IN THE BIBLE

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The kings of Egypt were not originally called pharaohs by the ancient Egyptians. In the late First Dynasty, the term used was *nesu-bit*, referring to the king, with the additional idea that the king was a combination of divine and mortal.¹ The term "pharaoh" for the king of Egypt developed over time, and was also used by the Hebrews and Greeks to describe the Egyptian ruler. Today, we commonly use the term "pharaoh" with reference to the kings of Ancient Egypt, including the Hyksos and Ptolemaic rulers, but usually not the Persian rulers, although many of them did have a formal Egyptian title manufactured for themselves.²

In Ancient Egypt, the term "pharaoh" was not originally a royal title. Translated literally, the earliest meaning of the Egyptian word *per-o* was "great house", that is the palace or residence of the king and his administration. This usage is found as early as 2500 BCE. The term "pharaoh" referred to the ordinances and commands the king issued in his administration, but not to the person of the king himself. In New Kingdom times (sixteenth century BCE), it began to designate the king himself, rather like our use of "The White House" to refer to the American president or "The Crown" to refer to the British monarch.³ Thus, at the beginning of the New Kingdom (Eighteenth Dynasty), we find Thutmose III (c. 1504-1450 BCE) referred to as "pharaoh." This is understood to be the earliest instance of the title being transferred to the king himself,⁴ and any reference before this period is considered an anachronism.

At first, the term was used without a personal name added to it, a practice mirrored in the earlier biblical books. After Shishak (c. 925 BCE), the title was used along with a personal name.⁵ The distribution of the biblical occurrences of the term "pharaoh" corresponds to this development in Egypt. Neither Genesis nor Exodus ever mentions the personal name of the king/pharaoh; while both the Joseph and the Moses narratives alternate between the titles "pharaoh" and "king of Egypt" With respect to Joseph, both

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terms appear together: *the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt gave offense to their lord the king of Egypt* (Gen. 40:1). *Pharaoh was angry with his two courtiers* (Gen. 40:2). The first appearances in the Bible of the title combined with the name of the ruler are those of Pharaoh Neco (II Kgs. 23:29) and Pharaoh Hophra (Jer. 44:30).

The term "pharaoh" is first employed in Genesis 12:15: *Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh*. Although the patriarchs lived many centuries before the title was used in this way, the Bible makes use of the term familiar to its audience at the time it was written. Thus, when Joseph speaks of "Pharaoh" (in Genesis 40:19, for example), this cannot be viewed as an exact quote, but rather as a reconstruction of what he said using terminology that came into usage much later.

There is much speculation as to who the pharaoh of the Exodus narrative might have been. The earliest candidate is Thutmose III, which accords with use of the term "pharaoh" to describe the king.⁶ This title, though anachronistic in the Book of Genesis, does not constitute a problem in regard to the Torah's Mosaic authorship.⁷

NOTES

1. Ian Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 7.
2. Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2011) p. 2.
3. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 95.
4. Claire Gottleib, "Who was Bat-Pharaoh, the Daughter of Pharaoh?", in Edith and Meir Lubetsky, eds., *New Inscriptions and Seals Relating to the Biblical World* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012) p. 84.
5. James Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt, the Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 87.
6. See Patricia Berlyn, "The Pharaohs Who Knew Moses", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 39:1 (January-March 2011) pp. 11-12.
7. J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1965) p. 47.