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Abu Zayd's Interpretation of the Story of the Prophet Moses: Reading the Prophet's Humanity in a Contextual Hermeneutic Frame

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Abstract

This study investigates Nasr Ḥāmid Abu Zayd's interpretation of the Qur'anic story of Prophet Moses through the framework of contextual hermeneutics, against the background of traditional Qur'anic exegesis that predominantly emphasizes the miraculous and transcendental aspects of prophethood and tends to portray prophets as infallible and distant figures. The study aims to analyze how Abu Zayd challenges this paradigm by reinterpreting revelation as a historical discourse shaped by human language, socio-political context, and lived struggle. Employing a qualitative textual analysis, the research examines Abu Zayd's primary works—*Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ (The Concept of Text)* and *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī (Critique of Religious Discourse)*—alongside contemporary academic discussions on humanistic and contextual hermeneutics. The findings show that Abu Zayd depicts Moses not as a mythical hero but as a profoundly human figure who fears, doubts, errs, and grows (Qur'ān 28:15–16), thereby foregrounding prophetic experience as ethically charged human struggle rather than static perfection. Through this lens, the *Qur'ān* emerges as a living dialogue between the divine and the human that continually generates meaning through

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historical interaction. The study concludes that Abu Zayd's hermeneutics redefines prophethood in terms of ethical humanity instead of unattainable divine impeccability and offers a liberating, contextually relevant interpretive model for modern Islamic thought, particularly for rethinking *asbāb al-nuzūl*, contextual *tafsīr*, and contemporary engagements with prophetic narratives.

Keywords: *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*; Contextual *Tafsīr*; Prophetic Humanity; Nasr Ḥāmid Abu Zayd; Modern Islamic Thought

INTRODUCTION

The story of Moses is one of the most powerful and recurring narratives in the Qur'an. His name is mentioned over a hundred times in various surahs, making him the most frequently mentioned prophet. Moses is not just a story from the past; he is a symbol of humanity's struggle against oppressive power, a symbol of moral courage in the face of tyrannical forces, and a representation of the inner dynamics of a prophet in the struggle between revelation and humanity (Roy, 2009). In the narrative of Moses and Pharaoh, we read not only of the parting of the sea or the rod that becomes a snake, but also of the human heart that dares to resist the deification of power. This spiritual and social drama continues to recur throughout human history.

However, classical interpretations of the story of Moses often focus on the miraculous and noble aspects of prophecy in an idealistic manner. Exegetical traditions such *as al-Ṭabarī*, *al-Qurṭubī*, and *Ibn Kathīr* portray Moses as a majestic and holy figure, seemingly without room for doubt or error. While this reading affirms the majesty of God's revelation and omnipotence, it often obscures the humanity of a prophet struggling amidst the harsh realities of his time (Yancey, 2015). As a result, the story of Moses is detached from its socio-historical context and transformed into a mythological tale far removed from the lives of modern humans (Al-Ṭabarī, 2000).

It is where the revolutionary thinking of Nasr Ḥāmid Abu Zayd (1943–2010), an Egyptian intellectual known for his courageous rereading of the Qur'ān through the lens of contextual hermeneutics, emerged. Abu Zayd viewed the sacred text not as a frozen entity descended outside of history, but as a living product of language within the human social context (*al-naṣṣ al-lughawi*). He wrote, "text is the result of interaction between the divine and the human in history" (Abu Zayd, 1990). With this view, Abu Zayd did not intend to diminish

the sanctity of the Qur'ān, but rather emphasized that the meaning of revelation only comes to life when it interacts with human experience.

Within this framework, the story of Moses is read not as a record of metaphysical miracles but as a liberating human drama. Moses was not a perfect, flawless prophet, but a man who was afraid, angry, made mistakes, and learned from his mistakes. When the Qur'ān tells us, "فَوَكَزَهُ مُوسَىٰ فَقَضَىٰ عَلَيْهِ", "Musa punched him, then he died because of it," QS. al-Qaṣaṣ [28]:15), Abu Zayd saw this event as clear evidence of Moses' humanity, not a weakness of prophecy, but rather part of the process of moral and spiritual formation of a messenger of God (Akyol, 2024).

By highlighting this human side, Abu Zayd sought to return the Qur'an to its most fundamental mission: to build humanity, not to create a cult. He rejected the mythological approach that transforms the prophet into a sinless and fearless figure, as this would deprive the people of a realistic role model. For Abu Zayd, it was precisely in Moses' moments of fear and doubt that he became more human and closer to us. And it is in his humanity that the value of prophecy finds its deepest relevance (Abu Zayd, 1992).

This context is what makes this research important. In the midst of frozen interpretations that tend to be dogmatic and apologetic, Abu Zayd's approach opens up new avenues for critical, rational, and contextual reading. He invited Muslims to read the Koran not only with the eyes of faith, but also with reason and social awareness. In a modern world full of inequality, interpretation like this becomes very relevant - because it not only asks what the meaning of the text is, but also what its moral message is for humans today.

Based on this background, this study was formulated to answer three main questions. First, how is Abu Zayd's hermeneutical method used in interpreting the story of Moses? This study will outline Abu Zayd's principles of contextual hermeneutics, which emphasize the relationship between the text, historical context, and the modern reader. Second, how does Abu Zayd reject a mythological reading of the story of Moses and replace it with a humanistic approach? This study will demonstrate how he carried out the process of demythologizing. Third, what are the implications of this interpretation for the concept of prophecy in contemporary Islam? This study will reveal how Abu Zayd's interpretation shifts the paradigm of prophecy from absolute perfection to ethical humanity—from a distant sacred figure to a role model close to human reality.

This study aims to describe Abu Zayd's hermeneutical approach to the story of the Prophet Moses, analyze the humanistic aspects of his interpretation, and reveal the relevance of this view to the understanding of prophecy and humanity in modern Islam. Thus, this study is expected to enrich contemporary exegetical discourse and offer a new paradigm in understanding revelation, not merely a collection of sacred commands, but a living dialogue between God and humanity that is always dynamic in history. It is, as Abu Zayd emphasized, that texts do not have a single meaning, but are always open to diverse readings (Abu Zayd, 1990). It is the spirit that animates this research: seeking new meaning in old stories, uncovering the humanity behind prophecy, and presenting Moses not merely as history, but as a mirror for human struggles today.

METHODS

The researchers used a qualitative approach with textual analysis (Satori & Komariah, 2017). This approach was chosen because the research did not focus on examining empirical data, but rather on understanding the meaning and dynamics of interpretation emerging from the texts of Nasr Ḥāmid Abu Zayd. The primary focus of this study is how Abu Zayd interprets the story of the Prophet Moses within a contextual hermeneutic framework that emphasizes the prophet's humanity.

The primary data sources come from Abu Zayd's original works, including: First, *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah fī ʿUlūm al-Qur'ān* (The Concept of Text in the Study of the Qur'ān), which contains the basic idea of the text as a product of linguistic culture (*al-nash al-lughawi*) and its relationship to the socio-historical context. Second, *Naqd al-Khiṭāb ad-Dīnī* (Critique of Religious Discourse), which explains Abu Zayd's critical approach to dogmatic interpretation and the freezing of the meaning of the text. Third, Abu Zayd's writings and interviews discuss narrative interpretation (*al-tafsīr al-qaṣaṣi*) and the relationship between text, history, and the reader's reality.

Secondary sources in the form of academic literature and modern research that examine Abu Zayd's hermeneutics, such as the works of Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun, as well as scientific articles from the Journal of Qur'anic Studies and contemporary dissertations on humanistic interpretation and Islamic liberation theology.

The data were analyzed using a hermeneutic approach, which involves reading the text within the dynamic relationship between the text (*naṣṣ*), the historical context of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), and the modern reader. The analysis was conducted simultaneously across linguistic, social, and ideological layers to uncover the moral and human meanings hidden behind the story of Moses. With this method, research goes beyond what the text says, but rather explores why and how the text is meaningful to contemporary humans (Rosidah et al., 2023).

RESULTS

Biography of Abu Zayd

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd is one of the most frequently debated names in the modern Islamic world. Not because of sensation, but because of his criticisms of religious traditions in Egypt and among Sunnis. He was born on July 10, 1943, in the small village of Qahafah, near the city of Tantah. His family was religious; his father was a Muslim Brotherhood activist who was imprisoned after the execution of Sayyid Qutb. From childhood, Abu Zayd grew up in an atmosphere of faith and struggle (Kurdi, 2010).

Like many Egyptian children of his time, he spent his days in a kuttab—learning to read, write, and then memorize the Qur'an. His outstanding intelligence led him to complete the Qur'an by the age of eight. The children in his village called him "Shaykh Nasr," a nickname that reflected both respect and hope (Furqan & Sakdiyah, 2022).

He completed his primary education in Tantah. But life was not always kind; his father died when he was only fourteen, forcing him to work to support the family. In 1960, after graduating from Tantah's technical school, he worked as an electronics technician at Cairo's National Communications Organization until 1972. His interest in literary criticism developed early—his articles began to appear at the age of 21 in the influential journal Al-Adab at the time. Two of his best-known works are *Hawl Adab al-'Ummal wa al-Fallahin* (On the Literature of Workers and Peasants) (N. H. A. Zayd, 1964b) and *Azmat al-Aghniyyah al-Mishriyyah* (N. H. A. Zayd, 1964a). At this stage, socialism and the spirit of revolution were taking over Egypt, and Abu Zayd was swept along by this intellectual current, even starting to be critical of the Muslim Brotherhood—although he had not yet expressed this openly in his writings.

In 1968, he continued his studies at Cairo University's Department of Arabic Language and Literature. He studied during the day and worked in the evening. Four years later, he graduated cum laude and was immediately appointed as a teaching assistant. In 1975, he received a Ford Foundation scholarship for two years at the American University in Cairo. He earned his MA two years later, again cum laude. His thesis, entitled "*Al-Ittijâh al-'Aqlî fî al-Tafsîr: Dirâsah fî Qadhiyyat al-Majâz 'inda al-Mu'tazilah*," was a study of rationalism in exegesis and was published in 1982.

His credentials didn't stop there. In 1981, he earned a PhD in Islamic Studies and Arabic, also with the highest honors. His dissertation, "Falsafat al-Ta'wîl," discussed the hermeneutics of the Qur'an according to Ibn 'Arabi—a topic that would later become the center of controversy against him. He was subsequently promoted to assistant professor and even received the 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Ahwani Award for his contributions to the humanities and Arab culture (Zainol et al., 2014).

The year 1992 was a turning point in his life. He married Dr. Ibtihal Younis at the age of 49. That same year, he applied for promotion to full professor. One of the works he submitted was *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dîni*, published in 1992 and immediately rocking the Islamic intellectual world. The book made him famous—and also brought a major storm his way.

It is where the so-called "Abu Zayd Case" began. Professor Abdul Shabur Shahin, one of his academic promotion examiners, publicly accused him of apostasy during a Friday sermon at the 'Amr ibn 'As Mosque. The accusation spread quickly through the Friday pulpits. Egyptian society was in an uproar. On June 14, 1995, the Cairo Isti'naf Court ruled that Abu Zayd had renounced Islam. The accusation of apostasy was then followed by a demand that he be forced to divorce his wife, because according to Egyptian personal law, a Muslim cannot marry an apostate (Mohammed, 2020).

The pressure persisted. The Al-Azhar Ulema Council demanded the death penalty. On August 5, 1996, the Egyptian Supreme Court upheld the previous verdict. Amidst a wave of political, social, and religious pressure, Abu Zayd chose to leave Egypt. On July 23, 1995, he left for Madrid with his wife, and then settled in Leiden, the Netherlands, from October 1995—an intellectual exile that lasted until at least 2008, when this data was last recorded (Arif, 2003).

Abu Zayd's Contextual Hermeneutics

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was one of the most courageous figures in breaking with the tradition of rigid, textual interpretation of Islam. He viewed the Qur'ān not as a text that "descended from heaven" in a frozen, closed form, but as *al-nash al-lughawī*, a living linguistic text within the social, cultural, and historical context of humanity. In his view, the Qur'ān is a revelation "incarnated in human language," thus possessing both divine and historical dimensions. (Abu Zayd, 1990).

Abu Zayd asserted that divine revelation (*al-waḥy al-ilāhī*) is transcendental, but when conveyed in Arabic, it becomes a human text (*al-nash al-insānī*) (Abu Zayd, 1992). Thus, interpretation of the Qur'ān cannot be separated from these two dimensions: the absolute divine aspect and the relative linguistic aspect. Therefore, the task of the interpreter is not merely to repeat the text, but also to understand the social and historical dynamics behind its emergence. Within the framework of hermeneutics, Abu Zayd rejects the idea that texts possess a single, fixed meaning. He argues that texts do not contain a single meaning, but rather live with the people who interact with them (Al-Juwaynī, 1950). In other words, meaning is not something stored in the text, but rather is generated through a dialogue between the text and the reader.

This framework makes the *asbab an-nuzūl* (context of revelation) not merely a historical record, but a window to understanding the relationship between text and reality. Abu Zayd criticized the way some classical commentators treated the *asbab an-nuzūl* merely as a passive setting without considering its socio-political function. From a contextual hermeneutic perspective, the *asbab an-nuzūl* is a field of interaction between revelation and society—a place where texts transform into ethics, law, and inspiration for change (Ramadan, 2013).

Furthermore, Abu Zayd emphasized the importance of the context of the modern reader (*al-siyāq al-mu'āṣir*) as an integral part of the interpretive process. He rejected the Salafist approach that isolates the text from modern reality. For Abu Zayd, every era has its own horizon of meaning. Therefore, understanding the story of Moses today cannot be separated from the reality of modern political tyranny, social inequality, and the global humanitarian crisis (Steinberg, 2022). His contextual hermeneutics serves as a bridge between the text and the contemporary human world—not to "change" the revelation, but to revive it in a new historical space.

Thus, Abu Zayd's hermeneutical method can be summarized in four basic principles: (1) the Qur'ān as a linguistic text (*al-nash al-lughawī*); (2) the conceptual separation between divine revelation and human text; (3) the importance of the historical context of revelation and the social conditions of the modern reader; and (4) the belief that meaning always arises from a dialogue between the text and the reader. These four pillars form the foundation of Abu Zayd's reading of the story of the Prophet Moses—not as a sacred legend, but rather as a reflection of humanity struggling under the shadow of power and fear.

The Concept of Prophetic Humanity in Islam

In classical Islamic tradition, prophets are understood as infallible beings. This concept arose from the theological need to maintain the purity of the authority of revelation and to ensure it remains free from human weaknesses. Al-Juwaynī, in al-Irshad, asserts that prophets are protected from error and sin (Al-Juwaynī, 1950). Thus, the prophet is seen as a perfect figure, almost flawless.

However, this approach often erases the humanity of the prophets. It distances them from the psychological realities of ordinary human beings—as if prophets were never afraid, angry, disappointed, or doubtful. Yet the Qur'ān itself depicts the prophets in very human terms: Noah grieving over his son (Quran 11:46), Abraham worrying (Quran 2:260), and even the Prophet Muhammad Saw being reprimanded for his sullen face (Quran 80:1-2).

Abu Zayd interpreted this phenomenon as part of a "cult of texts and figures," in which people tended to interpret revelation mythologically rather than historically. According to him, prophecy is not a metaphysical status that separates the prophet from humanity, but rather a spiritual experience that affirms humanity in its most perfect form. A prophet is a human being who strives to understand God's commands within the limits of his humanity (Sukidi, 2009).

In this context, Abu Zayd attempted to balance two extremes: the divinity of revelation and the humanity of its recipients. He did not deny *'iṣmah* (awakeness), but interpreted it functionally—that a prophet's wakefulness does not mean freedom from inner struggle, but rather the ability to remain steadfast amidst human error. With this approach, Moses can be read not only as a "prophet who parted the sea," but as "a man who feared facing Pharaoh but nevertheless proceeded." This view opens up new space for reflection in

modern Islamic theology. The humanity of the prophets is not a weakness, but rather a moral strength that connects them to their followers. As Abu Zayd explained, prophecy contains humanity, and through its humanity, prophecy becomes a message for humanity (Daus, 2018).

Through this reading, the story of Moses is no longer merely a miracle, but a story of human courage seeking God amidst history. He reminds us that true faith does not mean being free from fear, but rather the courage to walk with it. Herein lies the power of Abu Zayd's hermeneutics: restoring the meaning of revelation to humanity without losing His divinity.

Abu Zayd and the Rereading of the Story of the Prophet Musa

The story of Moses in the Qur'ān is a tale of courage, fear, and humanity's struggle against tyranny. But in most classical interpretations, this story is reduced to a mere account of miracles: a staff turning into a snake, a parting of the sea, a luminous hand, and God's terrible punishment for Pharaoh. While these interpretations glorify God's power, they often miss the social and humanitarian message at the heart of the story (Crouch, 2013).

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd rejects such mythological readings. For him, when the story of Moses is understood only in magical and supernatural terms, the message of revelation, which was originally intended to liberate humanity from oppression, loses its context. He wrote, "*al-tafsīr al-mithālī yufrīġ al-naṣṣ min ma'nāhu al-insānī*"—a mythological interpretation actually empties the text of its human meaning (Abu Zayd, 1992).

In Abu Zayd's view, Moses was not merely a prophet who performed miracles, but a representation of a human being who dared to face his deepest fears for the sake of justice. When Moses said, "My Lord, I have killed one of them, so I fear that they will kill me," (QS. al-Qaṣaṣ [28]:33), he displayed the human side of a prophet who was overcome with fear. But it was precisely from this fear that true courage emerged: the moral courage to fight against an oppressive system.

Abu Zayd reads Moses as a symbol of social struggle against an oppressive regime. He interprets the story of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh not merely as a historical event, but as a universal human drama—the eternal struggle between freedom and power, between conscience and political arrogance (Aufi, 2021). Within this framework,

Moses becomes an icon of humanity finding its God through resistance to the deification of other humans, Pharaoh, who said: "I am your most high God," QS. al-Nāzi'āt [79]:24).

For Abu Zayd, the story of Moses is a form of both spiritual and political resistance. Pharaoh is not simply a figure in ancient Egyptian history, but a representation of every system that deifies itself—whether it be a state, an ideology, or a religious leader. Therefore, reading the story of Moses is not nostalgia, but a reflection on the structures of oppression today. As he wrote: "ٱلْقُرْآنُ لَمْ يُحْكِ ٱلْقَصَصَ لِلتَّسْلِيَةِ بَلْ لِلتَّحَرُّكِ" — the Qur'ān does not tell stories for entertainment, but rather to move people (Abu Zayd, 1990).

This approach revives the social dimension of the Qur'an. Moses is no longer a distant figure, but rather a reflection of the struggle of modern humanity, confronting the "new Pharaohs"—absolute power, oppressive ideologies, and even religious systems devoid of their liberating spirit. Thus, Abu Zayd's hermeneutics invites readers not to dwell on Moses' miracles but to ask: what "sea" must we part today to restore humanity's freedom? (Akyol, 2021)

DISCUSSION

Hermeneutics as a Tool of Demythologization

Hermeneutics, in Abu Zayd's hands, became a scalpel for uncovering the social meaning behind Quranic narratives. He employed what he called "textualization." (*ta'wīl siyāqi*), namely, reading the text in relation to the context of revelation, the structure of language, and the social reality of the reading community. This principle is based on the belief that the Qur'ān was not revealed in a vacuum, but rather in the midst of 7th-century Arab society, which had its own language structure, traditions, and social problems.

Thus, every Qur'anic story—including the story of Moses—should not be understood literally, as if it were a factual historical report. For Abu Zayd, these stories are existential symbols that contain moral, social, and political lessons. He wrote:

"القصص في القرآن لا يُقصَد به التاريخ، بل العِبْرة والمعنى" — the stories in the Qur'ān are not intended as history, but as lessons and meaning.

From this perspective, hermeneutics functions as a tool for demythologization, freeing the text from the layers of myth that constrain it. Demythologization does not mean rejecting the divine dimension or the miracle of revelation, but rather returning the message

of revelation to a human horizon. In this way, Moses' miracle—the rod turning into a snake—is no longer read simply as a magical miracle, but rather as a symbol of moral power capable of shaking oppressive power.

Abu Zayd also criticized the "cult of the prophet" that has rendered the Qur'an lacking social relevance. In religious traditions, prophets are often positioned as inaccessible, sacred figures, even used as tools to legitimize power. However, according to Abu Zayd, precisely because they were human, prophets could serve as role models for their followers. He wrote:

"إذا فَقَدْنا إنسانيتهم فقد فَقَدْنا قُدوتهم"— if we lose their humanity, then we lose their role models.

Abu Zayd's contextual hermeneutics seeks to return the prophets—including Moses—to their human reality. By rejecting cults, he asserts that revelation exists to guide humans in history, not to distance them from reality. In Abu Zayd's interpretation, Moses is not a prophet who walks on miracles, but rather a human being who struggles amidst the suffering of his people. He is a human being sent to humanize others.

This view intersects with the thinking of Fazlur Rahman (1982), who asserted that the primary purpose of revelation is moral reform, not metaphysical miracles. For Rahman, the Qur'ān must be read in two movements: from the historical context to universal moral principles, and then back to the modern context. Abu Zayd continued this spirit by emphasizing that a literal reading actually kills the spirit of revelation—because revelation is not meant to be frozen, but brought to life in social action (Rahman, 1982).

With this approach, the story of Moses becomes a moral reflection for modern humans: how to confront power without losing human values. Moses did not fight Pharaoh out of personal ambition, but because he heard God's calling within him. That calling, in a contemporary context, can mean a struggle for justice, freedom of thought, and liberation from the shackles of oppressive systems—including religious systems that silence reason.

Abu Zayd's demythologizing of hermeneutics is not an attempt to "secularize the text" but an effort to purify the meaning of revelation from new forms of worship. He wants the Koran to return to being a book of liberation, not a book of justification for the status quo. In this view, Moses was not only a prophet, but "a man who became a symbol of truth against power."

Ultimately, Abu Zayd's hermeneutics returns Qur'anic interpretation to human reality. He asserts that every age needs its own Moses: a man who dares to uphold the truth, even with trembling hands. Herein lies the most important message of Abu Zayd's interpretation—that revelation did not only come down in the past, but continues to speak to those who are willing to hear it.

The Humanity of the Prophet in Tafsīr Abu Zayd

In the story of the Prophet Moses, the Qur'ān presents the figure of a prophet who is not only heroic, but also humane—with all the fears, doubts, and even mistakes attached to him. It is a side that is often ignored in traditional interpretations, which tend to idealistically worship prophecy. In Q.S. al-Qaṣaṣ [28]:15, Moses is described as killing an Egyptian by accident, "(And Moses entered the city (Memphis) when the people were careless, he found two men fighting in the city; one from his group (the Children of Israel) and the other (again) from his enemies (the Pharaohs). So, people from his group asked him for help against people from his enemies. Then Musa punched him, and his enemy died. Moses said, 'This is the work of the devil; indeed, he is a misleading and real enemy."

This verse shows that Moses was not an infallible angel, but rather a human being struggling to understand God's will amidst his emotional turmoil. Abu Zayd believes that the Qur'an's recognition of the humanity of the prophets is actually proof of the authenticity of revelation. If the stories of the prophets were presented without flaws and errors, the Qur'an would become a myth, not a moral reflection that real people could emulate (Sadiqi, 2020).

Abu Zayd emphasized that *al-insāniyyah* (humanity) does not conflict with *al-nubuwwah* (prophecy). In his view, prophecy actually finds its glory in human experience. Prophets are not supernatural entities separated from the world, but rather humans who are most aware of God and most persistent in fighting to uphold the truth. Therefore, when Musa was afraid (QS. Ṭāhā [20]:45), when he doubted his words (QS. al-Qaṣaṣ [28]:33), even when he was angry with his brother Harun (QS. al-A'rāf [7]: 150), all of that was not a form of weakness, but rather a reflection of the depth of humanity.

According to Abu Zayd, this is where the moral strength of prophecy lies—not because prophets are never wrong, but because they always return to the truth after falling.

Prophets are human beings who fight within themselves before conquering the world around them. He wrote:

"النبيُّ ليس مَلَكًا، بل هو إنسانٌ يجتهدُ لِيُحَقِّقَ إرادةَ الله في التاريخ."— Prophets are not angels, but humans who struggle to realize God's will in history (Abu Zayd, 1992).

Thus, Abu Zayd's interpretation actually strengthens the moral dimension of prophecy. He rejects the theological view that regards *'iṣmah* (protection) as an absolute shield against all wrongdoing (Anthony, 2020). From a humanistic hermeneutical perspective, *'iṣmah* does not mean the absence of sin, but rather fidelity to the truth despite falling into error. Just as Moses regretted his actions and said:

"قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِي فَاغْفِرْ لِيْ فَغَفَرَ لَهٗ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ" ("O my Lord, I have truly wronged myself, so forgive me." QS. al-Qaṣaṣ [28]:16), the Qur'ān presents Moses' repentance as the pinnacle of human spirituality—not a deficiency, but true moral strength.

Abu Zayd believes that this awareness is missing in many contemporary religious readings. When the prophet is made into an untouchable, perfect figure, the people lose a real role model. The prophet becomes an unfollowable myth, not an inspiration for ethical struggle. He wrote:

"التقديسُ الغُلُوُّ للأنبياءِ قد أعطَلَهُم عن الحياةِ الحقيقيةِ في وعيِ المسلمين."— the excessive cult of the prophets has removed them from real life in the consciousness of Muslims (Abu Zayd, 1992).

By reading Moses in a humane way, Abu Zayd was not lowering the status of the prophets, but rather re-establishing their prophetic function. Because only humans can be role models for others, in this view, the prophet's humanity is not a weakness, but rather a moral and existential strength. Moses, with his fear, anger, and regret, is the most authentic example of how faith works: not without anxiety, but with the courage to continue walking in that anxiety (Regeringsbeleid et al., 2006).

Implications for the Concept of Prophethood and Modern Interpretation

Abu Zayd's humanistic hermeneutical approach gave birth to a new paradigm in understanding the concept of prophecy (*nubuwwah*) in Islam. First, he reinterprets the concept of *'iṣmah* (prophet's wakefulness) not as the absence of error, but rather the ability to always return to the truth after slipping (Rahman, 1982). This paradigm differs from classical

theology such as al-Juwaynī's view in al-Irsyād, which asserts that the prophets are protected from error and sin (Al-Juwaynī, 1950). Abu Zayd did not reject *'iṣmah*, but reformulated it to be in harmony with the human nature of prophethood.

In this way, prophecy is no longer understood as a metaphysical status that separates prophets from humans, but rather as an ethical function that affirms humanity itself. The Prophet became a role model not because of his perfection, but because of his moral struggle. In this modern interpretation, *nubuwwah* is not just a revelation that comes down from the sky, but a moral awareness that grows on earth—in the midst of history, conflict, and human suffering (Nasr, 2009).

Second, Abu Zayd's interpretation paves the way for a reading of the Qur'ān that is more relevant to modern human experience. He rejects literal and apologetic approaches that imprison the text in the past. For him, each era has its own horizon of meaning that demands a new dialogue with the text. Thus, the story of Moses is not just a historical legacy, but an ethical guide for modern humans who are faced with "contemporary Pharaohs": oppressive political power, capitalism that deifies matter, and religious fundamentalism that silences reason.

This view aligns with Fazlur Rahman (1982), who emphasized the need for a "double movement" in interpretation—movement from historical context to universal moral principles, then back to the modern context (Ichsan et al., 2023). Abu Zayd applied this principle within his hermeneutical framework: sacred texts are not historical fossils, but moral messages that continue to live in every age. He wrote:

"القرآن لا يزالُ يُنتِجُ معنًى جديدًا كلّما احتضنَ الإنسانُ معانيه" — The Qur'ān always gives birth to new meanings as long as humans are willing to embrace its meaning (Abu Zayd, 1990).

Third, the most profound implication of this interpretation is the return of the Qur'ān to its original function: as a moral and social text. In the Islamic scholarly tradition, the moral function of the Qur'ān is often overshadowed by legal debates and theological dogma. In fact, the primary purpose of revelation is *tazkiyah al-insān*. By presenting Moses as a struggling man, Abu Zayd revived the prophetic spirit of Islam, which freed humanity from oppression, both spiritual and social (N. A. Zayd, 2025).

Within the framework of modern interpretation, Abu Zayd's approach bridges faith and rationality, text and context. He taught that understanding the Qur'an does not mean

stifling its meaning with dogma, but rather bringing it to life through concrete actions. His contextual hermeneutics invites Muslims to read revelation not merely with their eyes, but with historical awareness and social responsibility.

Like Moses who heard God's voice from behind the flames of fire on Mount Ṭūr (Quran 20:12–13), modern humans are called to hear the "voice of revelation" amidst the flames of our time: the fires of greed, violence, and loss of meaning. Abu Zayd's commentary reminds us that every age needs its own Moses—a man who dared to speak the truth before Pharaoh, even with trembling hands (Calabria, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Nasr Ḥāmid Abu Zayd's hermeneutics of the Prophet Moses narrative shifts the understanding of revelation from a closed, sacred theology to an open, humanistic one. Rejecting the sacred text as a "silent monument" of past doctrines, he views the Qur'ān as a *kitābun insānī* engaging human experience and history. In Q. al-Qaṣaṣ:15–16, Abu Zayd interprets Moses' unintentional killing as moral human strength rather than prophetic weakness, redefining *ma'ṣūm* from absolute impeccability to moral consistency. It liberates believers from the theological burden of infallible figures and enables critical, contextual exegesis. Ultimately, Abu Zayd's approach revolutionizes contemporary Islamic consciousness by positioning revelation as a tool for human elevation through historical-critical dialogue.

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