

Decolonizing the Meaning of Yam: The Ecological Crisis of the Nile Delta and the Erosion of Prophetic Memory in Modern Exegesis

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the ecological crisis in the Nile Delta (2016–2026) triggered by an epistemological shift in the meaning of the word Yam (يَم) in the prophetic narrative of Moses from an authoritative theological entity to mere neutral hydrological data. This research seeks to uncover how the concretization of wetlands legitimizes the destruction of prophetic historical memory. The methods employed include Decolonial Ecolinguistics, integrating stylistic-phonological analysis (the psychoacoustic effects of the closed mim sound), Edward Said's Traveling Theory to trace the migration of textual meaning, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Egyptian development policy documents. The research findings indicate that the reduction of the meaning of Yam to a "flat" physical fact provides justification for massive infrastructure projects that eradicate papyrus plants (*Cyperus papyrus*). This extinction results in "systematic amnesia," where the Qur'anic narrative loses its empirical anchor and is reduced to mere myth due to the loss of material evidence in nature. In conclusion, the environmental crisis in the Nile Delta is a manifestation of an interpretive crisis. This study proposes the concept of Ecological Repentance (al-tawbah al-ikūlūjiyyah) as a theo-ecological solution. The salvation of the Nile ecosystem must begin with decolonizing the perspective on sacred texts, restoring nature as an "ayat" that has the right to sustainability, transcending materialistic-economic logic

INTRODUCTION

The Nile River is not merely a hydrological entity flowing across Africa's geopolitical borders; it is a theological epicenter and a historical medium that preserves prophetic memories. One of the most vital silent witnesses of this civilization is the papyrus plant (*Cyperus papyrus*). In the time of the Prophet Moses, papyrus was not merely part of the biotic ecosystem but a vital instrument for recording divine messages and the legacy of civilization. However, over the past decade (2016–2026), the existence of this plant has been on the brink of mass extinction. (El-Ghani et al. 2011)

However, over the past decade (2016–2026), the existence of this plant has been on the brink of mass extinction. This indicates that ecological degradation (massive urban sprawl) and land fragmentation have blocked access to natural sediment along riverbanks. The transformation of marsh habitats into residential areas and inland agricultural land has eliminated the ideal growing space for papyrus, thereby severing the modern human's visual connection to the historical landscape that once served as the backdrop for prophetic narratives. (Bratley and Ghoneim 2018)

In the prophetic tradition, natural elements such as the Nile River, marshes, and papyrus plants are not merely decorative elements in the story. They are key elements that made the miracles or events possible. (Khalid 2019). When human activities destroy these natural elements, humanity loses their physical evidence. Consequently, stories that should be real now turn into fairy tales on paper, as if the events took place in a vacuum with no connection to our earth. (Mignolo 2009)

Physical data reveals a troubling paradox. While modern satellite technology and hydraulic simulations can map the Nile's 2025 flow with high precision, its ecological quality has plummeted sharply – and recent research confirms widespread, irreversible heavy metal pollution in the Nile Delta system. (Abotalib et al. 2023) Massive sedimentation has altered the river's topography, where the area of wetlands – the ideal habitat for papyrus – has drastically shrunk from 207,912 hectares in 1987 to just 146,381 hectares in 2019, representing a decline of approximately 30%. (Fouad et al. 2022). These wetlands are now experiencing spatial encroachment by settlements and agricultural areas due to population pressure; in the eastern Nile Delta, urban areas have increased by 222.5% over the past three decades, converting more than 235 km² of wetlands into concrete. (Bratley and Ghoneim 2018). Consequently, a papyrus biomass crisis has emerged, with the species reaching “nearly extinct” status in its native habitat – a crisis that not only shatters the traditional paper industry but also severs humanity's historical memory of the Nile River. (El-Ghani et al. 2011)

This phenomenon reflects the fracturing of the sacred triangular relationship between God, humanity, and nature. In prophetic narratives, nature is a verse or a sign laid out by God for humans to read. However, when modern humans' spatial invasion and anthropogenic ego destroy the papyrus habitat, we are forcibly erasing our own historical memory. By destroying nature along the Nile, humans are not only damaging the environment but also severing the inner connection with the traces of God. Without the original natural world, humanity

loses the means to summon the presence of the prophetic history that once was tangible on this earth. This phenomenon proves that the loss of a plant species is not merely a biological loss, but a tragedy for human faith and knowledge.

If a fact lacks physical evidence, philosophically speaking, humans tend to regard it as a myth. By destroying the Nile's natural environment, modern humanity is severing the connection between "the story in the book" and "the reality on earth." Consequently, the history of the Prophet – which should serve as a guide for life – has been reduced to nothing more than a bedtime story, as it no longer relates to the world we walk upon today.

In the past, people viewed the Nile River and papyrus plants as signs of God's power (Ayat Kauniyah). Now, because its natural environment has been destroyed and transformed into an industrial zone, humans see the Nile only as an economic object. This is the most severe form of amnesia: humans have forgotten their God because they themselves have erased God's "traces" from the face of the earth through reckless development.

This destruction occurs through the hegemony of selfish development. Modern humans do not burn history books, but they concrete over the earth's surface that holds that history. When the Nile marshes are drained and the papyrus is eradicated, the bridge between memory (the past) and perception (the present) is severed. This is systematic amnesia: a condition in which humans are forced to forget their God because they have destroyed the "stage" where God revealed His greatness to the Prophets.

The ultimate consequence of this systematic amnesia is the birth of a "meaning-blind" civilization. We build cities upon the ruins of history, yet we lose the soul of that place. When the bridge between prophetic memory and the reality of the Nile is severed, modern humans are actually constructing a concrete prison for their own spirituality. This is why decolonizing the way we view nature and history has become so urgent: so that we do not continue to be heirs to a history that has forgotten its own earthly roots

In the past, humans viewed the Nile River and papyrus as something sacred, majestic, and worthy of protection because they were signs of God's power. Now, that meaning is dead; humans see water merely as a liquid commodity to be sold and swamps as useless land to be paved over. When meaning dies, humanity's respect for nature dies as well. The story of Prophet Moses on the stage of the Nile should serve as a warning to humanity not to be arrogant toward nature. Modern humanity. The destruction of nature along the Nile not only erases our memory of the stories of the Prophets but also severs the spiritual connection linking humanity to its Creator. In the Quranic perspective, nature is a verse – tangible signs spread by God so that humans may recognize His presence. Yet, when the ego of human development chooses to fill swamps with concrete and let papyrus go extinct, we are actually silencing God's voice on earth.

As a result, God becomes merely an abstract concept within a book. Without the authentic stage of nature, humanity loses the means to directly experience His majesty. This is the crux of the problem: modern humans feel they can exercise full dominion over the world because they have erased the traces of

God's presence from their view. A relationship that was once intimate and profound has now turned into a dry and distant one because the medium of encounter between humans and God is so far removed.

Various semantic studies have distinguished the terms *al-baḥr* and *al-yamm* in the Qur'an, indicating that *al-yamm* consistently appears in contexts of punishment and fear, while *al-baḥr* is more general and can appear in contexts of both mercy and punishment. (Nugroho and An 2025). A recent study (2026) further reinforces these findings through a modern maritime perspective, demonstrating that this semantic distinction aligns with the physical characteristics of water bodies which can serve as both a source of life and a destructive force of nature.

Thus, the position of this research is as a pioneering study that connects three previously separate domains: Qur'anic philology, development discourse criticism, and the actual ecological crisis in the Nile Delta. The proposed theo-ecological synthesis – namely, the concept of Ecological Repentance is an original contribution expected to pave the way for the reconstruction of the relationship between humans, sacred texts, and nature within contemporary Islamic discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between Qur'anic interpretation, ecological ethics, and decolonial thought has received increasing scholarly attention, particularly in response to the growing influence of positivist epistemology in contemporary Islamic studies. Existing literature demonstrates that modern interpretive approaches often marginalize the theological and ethical dimensions of Qur'anic language, thereby reducing sacred concepts to descriptive historical or geographical references. The present study builds upon this body of scholarship by examining how the semantic transformation of the Qur'anic term *Yam* contributes to the ecological crisis in the Nile Delta through the erosion of prophetic memory.

The decolonization of Qur'anic studies has become a major academic discourse. Lumbard (2022) argues that contemporary Qur'anic scholarship should move beyond the dominance of Orientalist paradigms and restore the authority of the Islamic exegetical tradition. Similarly, Yunus (2025) emphasizes the importance of epistemic justice by reassessing Orientalist methodologies that have shaped modern *tafsir* studies. Both scholars contend that decolonizing interpretation is essential for recovering indigenous Islamic epistemology and preventing the reduction of sacred texts into purely historical or linguistic objects. Their perspectives provide the theoretical foundation for understanding how the meaning of *Yam* has gradually shifted from a sacred theological concept to a neutral hydrological term.

Translation studies further demonstrate that ideological perspectives significantly influence the interpretation of Qur'anic terminology. Erebiha and Almannab (2026) reveal that translators inevitably intervene in the semantic construction of Qur'anic expressions, allowing ideological assumptions to shape lexical choices and textual openness. Likewise, *Ideological Horizons in English*

Translations of the Qur'an (2026) explains that translators' ideological orientations determine translation strategies, often narrowing the semantic richness of Qur'anic vocabulary. Complementing these findings, Yakubovych (2022) highlights the inseparable relationship between classical exegetical traditions, cultural contexts, and translation processes across different languages. Collectively, these studies indicate that translation is not merely a linguistic activity but also an epistemological process capable of preserving or diminishing the theological significance of Qur'anic concepts such as Yam.

Beyond translation, environmental scholarship has documented the severe ecological degradation occurring in the Nile Delta. El-Ghani et al. (2011) report the dramatic decline of *Cyperus papyrus* populations due to habitat degradation. Bratley and Ghoneim (2018) demonstrate that rapid urban expansion has accelerated wetland conversion, while Fouad et al. (2022) describe the continuous shrinkage of wetlands that historically supported papyrus ecosystems. Furthermore, Abotalib et al. (2023) identify extensive heavy-metal pollution resulting from intensive development and water management practices. These environmental studies provide empirical evidence that ecological degradation in the Nile Delta extends beyond biodiversity loss and threatens historically significant landscapes associated with prophetic narratives.

The theoretical framework of this study is also informed by decolonial and eco-theological scholarship. Mignolo (2011) argues that Western modernity systematically marginalizes alternative epistemologies by privileging scientific rationalism over indigenous systems of knowledge. Similarly, Nasr (1997) maintains that the modern ecological crisis originates from humanity's loss of awareness of nature's sacred character. Khalid (2019) further develops this perspective by positioning environmental stewardship as an integral component of Islamic ethics and emphasizing that nature functions as divine signs (ayat) rather than mere natural resources. These arguments collectively support the proposition that ecological destruction is fundamentally an epistemological and spiritual crisis rather than solely an environmental problem.

Although previous studies have examined Qur'anic translation, decolonial interpretation, ecological ethics, and environmental degradation independently, limited research has integrated these perspectives into a unified analytical framework. The existing literature rarely investigates how semantic changes in Qur'anic terminology influence environmental perceptions and development policies. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by synthesizing decolonial Qur'anic studies, ecolinguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis, and environmental evidence from the Nile Delta. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the study introduces the concept of Ecological Repentance (al-tawbah al-ikūlūjiyyah), proposing that ecological restoration must begin with restoring the theological meaning of sacred language and rebuilding humanity's collective ecological memory.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method with a Decolonial Ecolinguistics approach. This approach was chosen to unpack how human perspectives on language (text) influence their treatment of nature (the physical world).

Research Approach

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to dissect the technocratic and positivistic language of development, which often obscures the destruction of sacred spaces. Edward Said's "Traveling Theory" framework is employed to trace how the meaning of "Yam" undergoes reduction when shifting from a theological context into secular development policies. (Mohanty, n.d.) and a decolonial perspective to critique the separation between "physical progress" and "the sanctity of nature" inherited from modern-positivist thought.

Data Sources

a. Primary Data

The primary data for this study includes sacred texts specifically Quranic verses related to the story of Moses and aquatic terminology (Yam and Bahr) – particularly Surah Al-A'raf: 133–136, Taha: 77, and Asy-Syu'ara: 54. Geospatial Data, namely satellite imagery (such as Sentinel-2 or Landsat) regarding land-use changes in the Nile Delta (reclamation/concretization) for the period 2016–2026. Biomass Data Technical reports on the population and extinction of Papyrus plants (*Cyperus papyrus*) in the Nile River marsh habitats.

b. Secondary Data

The secondary data for this study includes interpretive literature. Classical exegetical texts (Linguistics/Stylistics) and modern exegetical works (Ministry of Religious Affairs/International). Policy documents include reports on river development or normalization that reflect a positivist-scientific perspective. Theoretical references to the works of C.E.M. Joad on materialism and Walter Dignolo on decoloniality.

Data Analysis Stage

Data analysis in this study was conducted through three interconnected stages. The first stage is semantic-stylistic analysis, which aims to dissect the differences in the characteristics of the words Yam and Bahr in the original text of the Qur'an as well as classical exegetical works. In this stage, the researcher traces all occurrences of the words "Yam" and "Bahr" in the Qur'an, then identifies their phonological structures—specifically the sound of the closed "mim" in "Yam," which psychoacoustically evokes a sensation of being trapped and fear—and performs a collocation analysis to identify the verbs that consistently accompany these two words. (Bartsch, Evert, and Erlangen-Nürnberg 2014). Additionally, balaghah techniques such as Jawami' al-Kalim, as explained by Az-Zamakhsyari in Tafsir al-Kasysyaf, are also analyzed to capture the theological functions intentionally constructed by the linguistic structure of the Qur'an. The objective of this first stage is to demonstrate the existence of the text's "spirit" that is lost in modern understanding namely, the interpretation of "Yam" as an agentive subject and executor of God's punishment, rather than merely a passive geographical marker.

The second stage is spatial criticism (spatial analysis). In this stage, the researcher connects empirical data on concretization and land-cover changes in the Nile Delta derived from secondary studies—with the loss of tangible grounding for the historical memory of the prophetic tradition. The analysis focuses on how the material “concrete” has physically covered the natural papyrus marsh habitat that serves as an empirical reference for the narrative of Yam in the Qur’an. Using spatial change maps and data on the shrinking of water bodies, the researcher demonstrates that the invasion of settlements and industrial zones has not only altered the river’s topography but also silenced the “stage” where miracles were displayed. Thus, spatial criticism serves to translate linguistic findings from the first stage into measurable material reality.

The third stage is a theo ecological synthesis. Here, the researcher integrates findings from semantic-stylistic analysis (regarding the agentive and sacred nature of Yam) with findings from spatial criticism (regarding the physical degradation of the papyrus habitat and historical amnesia). This synthesis is conducted within a decolonial and Critical Discourse Analysis framework, thereby yielding not only critique but also a conceptual solution: “Ecological Repentance” (*al-tawbah al-ikūlūjiyyah*). This concept is formulated as an epistemological imperative to move away from a positivist worldview that reduces nature to lifeless objects, toward a classical worldview that recognizes nature as an authoritative sign of God. In this final stage, the researcher also formulates concrete policy recommendations (a moratorium on concrete construction, papyrus rewilding, curriculum revision) as practical implementations of Ecological Repentance. The entire analytical process was conducted using a qualitative-interpretive approach while adhering to the principles of openness and replicability, as is customary in critical-literary studies.

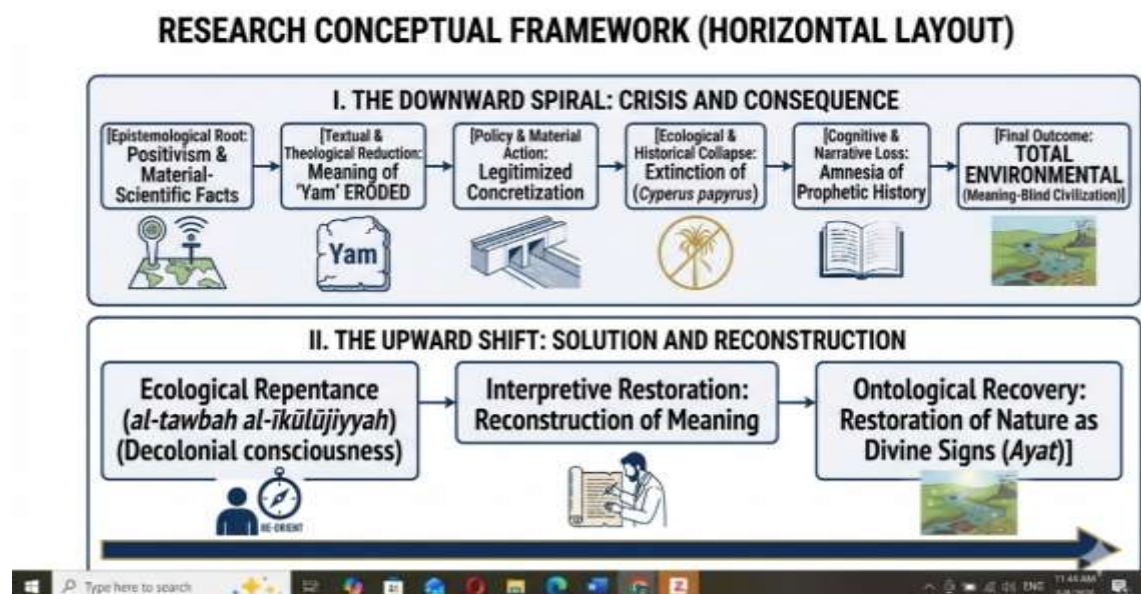


Figure 1. Logic Model

RESULTS

Stylistic Analysis: Yam as a Theological Instrument

Based on a stylistic analysis of the original text, it was found that the choice of the word Yam (يَم) is not merely a geographical marker but a theological instrument constructed through precise linguistic structure.

Balaghah Analysis (Az-Zamakhshari): Referring to Tafsir al-Kasysyaf, the repetition and ambiguity in the phrase “fa ghashiyahum min al-yammi ma ghashiyahum” constitute a form of Jawami' al-Kalim. Az-Zamakhshari asserts that the use of the word “ma” (what...) here serves to depict a horror that transcends the limits of human imagination (li al-tahwil wa al-ta'dzim). That which “overwhelmed” Pharaoh is mysterious and formidable; phonologically, (the sound of tightly closed lips on the letter Mim) creates a psychological effect of a suffocating and constricted atmosphere.

Collocation Analysis (Al-Qurthubi & Ibn Kathir): Data from the commentaries of al-Qurthubi and Ibn Kathir indicate that the word Yam is consistently paired with forceful verbs such as nabadza (to hurl) and aghraqa (to drown). This demonstrates that, within classical discourse, the waters are viewed as a living entity functioning as the executor of God's punishment, not merely a passive liquid substance.

Traveling Theory (The Erosion of Meaning from Mystery to Physical Data)

This study employs Edward Said's Traveling Theory framework to trace how the meaning of “Yam” undergoes erosion as it migrates from classical exegesis to modern-positivist discourse. Epistemological Erosion, namely a shift from an understanding of profound mystery (classical) toward flat data (modern). Modern interpreters with a positivistic bent often reduce this narrative to mere hydrological data—such as calculations of tides, wind speeds, or geographic coordinates in the Nile Delta. In this process of the “journey” of meaning, the sacred value of nature is lost. When the Nile is understood solely as a physical phenomenon that can be mathematically calculated, it loses its theological authority. Nature is no longer feared as the “Army of God” but is merely regarded as a neutral material object.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The erosion of meaning at the interpretive level has tangible sociopolitical implications on the ground, particularly regarding massive development policies in river ecosystem areas.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals that the concrete-based policies in the Nile Delta (2016–2026) derive implicit legitimacy from this positivistic way of thinking. Since nature (waterways) is already regarded as a “flat” and “dead” physical object in the modern mind, covering it with concrete is seen as infrastructure progress, not the destruction of a miraculous site.

The destruction of Papyrus habitats for construction projects is a form of historical amnesia. Concrete is positioned as the dominant narrative of “progress,” while Papyrus which serves as a silent witness to the theological events of Yam is regarded as a physical obstacle that must be removed. Here,

power employs technocratic language to supplant the awe-inspiring language of revelation.

In conclusion, this study argues that the environmental crisis occurring in the Nile Delta stems from an epistemological crisis in interpreting sacred texts. When physical evidence of nature (such as the Papyrus and the marshes) is lost due to concretization, the Qur'anic narrative loses its empirical reference for future generations.

Efforts are needed to restore Az-Zamakhsyari's profound understanding into contemporary exegesis. Environmental restoration must begin with the restoration of language: ceasing to view nature as a flat economic commodity, and returning to seeing it as a sign of God that possesses authority and the right to remain sustainable.

DISCUSSION

This study originated from an academic concern regarding how a word in the sacred text namely, Yam in the story of Moses and Pharaoh undergoes a radical transformation of meaning when it shifts from the classical exegetical tradition into modern positivistic discourse. The research findings presented reveal three main insights: first, stylistically and semantically, "Yam" in classical exegesis is not a passive geographical object but an active agent possessing theological authority. Second, through the process of "Traveling Theory," this meaning shrinks into mere flat hydrological data. Third, this narrowing of meaning directly legitimizes the concrete-paving policies that destroy the papyrus habitat as a historical memory of the prophetic era. In this discussion section, these three findings will be engaged with the theoretical framework outlined in the literature review, while also demonstrating the original contribution of this research to the study of Islamic eco-theology and development discourse criticism.

First, the finding regarding the theological status of the word Yam in the classical tradition reinforces and simultaneously expands upon Az-Zamakhsyari's concept of Jawami' al-Kalim. In Tafsir al-Kasysyaf, Az-Zamakhsyari indeed demonstrated that the phrase "فَعَشِيَهُمْ مِنَ اللَّيْلِ مَا عَشِيَهُمْ" employs the word مَا (what) to evoke the effects of tahwil (horror) and ta'dzim (veneration). However, this study adds a new dimension: a phonological and collocation analysis not explicitly undertaken by Az-Zamakhsyari. The closed mim sound in the word Yam creates a psychoacoustic sensation of being "crushed," and the consistent collocation with the verbs أَغْرَقَ (to drown) and نَبَذَ (to cast out) demonstrates that the Qur'an precisely constructs nature as a moral agent, not merely a physical backdrop. This finding aligns with Toshihiko Izutsu's argument in **Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an** that the Qur'anic lexicon is semantically structured to form a coherent worldview. However, this study goes beyond Izutsu by demonstrating that this semantic structure is not merely conceptual but also has material implications for how modern humans treat nature. In other words, when the understanding of Yam as a "living subject" is lost, so too is the ethical resistance to protect the ecosystem that serves as the physical reference for the word.

Second, the application of Edward Said's Traveling Theory framework in this study successfully maps out systematically how the meaning of Yam undergoes epistemological attrition in its journey from classical interpretation to modern discourse. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said emphasizes that every transfer of ideas across historical and cultural contexts inevitably brings transformation, which often takes the form of reduction or distortion due to resistance from the dominant discourse at the destination (Said 1983). In the case of Yam, the destination context is modernity, dominated by a positivist epistemology that recognizes only facts that can be measured, calculated, and empirically verified. Consequently, the sacred, mysterious, and agency-based dimensions of Yam cannot fit into the modern framework of thought, leaving only hydrological data such as depth, salinity, or geographical coordinates. This finding reinforces Walter Mignolo's critique in *The Darker Side of Modernity* that modernity not only brings a project of rationalization but also systematically erases local and traditional epistemologies that do not align with the Western scientific canon (Mignolo, 2011). However, this study makes a specific contribution by demonstrating that such epistemological erasure also occurs within the realm of Qur'anic exegesis, where modern exegetes with a positivist tendency unconsciously adopt a secular and reductionist perspective. The implications are grave: when the Yam is viewed merely as ordinary water, there is no longer a theological basis to oppose the concrete-paving project that covers the papyrus swamps, since water and swamps are seen only as lifeless objects lacking rights or authority.

Third, findings regarding the legitimization of concrete development through critical discourse analysis lift the veil on how technocratic development language functions as a tool of power. Drawing on Fairclough's model in *Critical Discourse Analysis*, this study identifies three discourse strategies employed in Egyptian policy documents from the 2016–2026 period. (El-Ghani et al. 2011). The first strategy is the neutralization of values, namely the use of phrases such as "wetlands have economic potential," which erases the sacred dimension of the ecosystem. The second strategy is the framing of "obstacles," where papyrus swamps are portrayed as barriers to connectivity between industrial zones. The third strategy is legal framing through legislation on the "utilization of dormant land," which implicitly asserts that land not generating economic profit is "dormant" and therefore legitimate to be "awakened" (concreted over). These findings align with Anabela Carvalho's research on climate change discourse, which shows that media and policymakers often employ similar strategies to frame environmental issues as purely technical problems rather than moral crises. (Carvalho 2007). However, this study goes beyond Carvalho by demonstrating that, in the Egyptian context, this discursive strategy is not only political-economic but also theological, as it operates by stripping the sacred meaning from key Quranic terms such as Yam. In other words, before concrete physically covers the land, "discursive concrete" first covers the meaning. This is what the study refers to as symbolic violence on an epistemological scale.

Fourth, the discovery of a strong correlation between a decline in theological understanding of Yam and an increase in the rate of papyrus deforestation is not merely a coincidence. Substantively, this correlation indicates a structural relationship between how humans read texts and how humans treat nature. A worldview that views nature as a lifeless object to be freely exploited does not arise in a vacuum; it is shaped by continuous interpretive practices, including the interpretation of sacred texts. When modern exegetes (and Quran readers in general) began to disregard the dimensions of *tahwil* and *ta'dzim* in the word Yam, they unconsciously granted a license for policies that destroy ecosystems. This finding reinforces Seyyed Hossein Nasr's argument in *Man and Nature* that the modern ecological crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis rooted in the loss of awareness of the sacredness of nature. However, while Nasr focuses more on philosophy and mysticism, this study demonstrates that the root of the problem also lies in concrete, literal interpretive practices. Thus, this research bridges the gap between Nasr's philosophical critique and the reality of on-the-ground policies in the Nile Delta.

Fifth, the findings regarding historical amnesia resulting from the extinction of papyrus lead us to reflect on the function of ecosystems as the collective memory of humanity. In Islamic tradition, nature functions not only as a resource but also as a *mau'izhah* (visual reminder) and an *ayat* (sign). When the papyrus—the natural habitat of the Yam narrative goes extinct, future generations will never experience the sensation of being in the dark, deep, and mysterious marshes a sensation that classical exegetes used to grasp the sheer magnitude of “that which covered Pharaoh” in the Yam. The loss of this empirical experience renders the Qur'anic verse abstract and difficult to imagine, which in turn accelerates the process of further desacralization. This is a vicious cycle: the fewer people who experience the awe-inspiring natural world, the easier it becomes for technocratic discourse to frame nature as a lifeless object, and the faster nature itself is destroyed. This study refers to this condition as a referential crisis, namely the loss of correlation between the text and the physical reality to which it refers. In a broader context, these findings are relevant to debates regarding the preservation of historical and natural sites; however, this study clearly demonstrates that for Muslims, the destruction of the papyrus ecosystem is equivalent to the destruction of physical evidence of a miracle, which constitutes a form of violence against faith itself.

Finally, the concept of ecological repentance offered as a synthesis is not merely a moral slogan, but an epistemological necessity grounded in the internal logic of the Qur'an itself. Repentance, conceptually, means returning (*ruju'*) from the wrong path to the right path. (Muhammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manzur, 2015) In this context, ecological repentance means turning away from a positivistic worldview that reduces nature to data, toward a classical worldview that recognizes nature as an active agent and a sign of God. However, ecological repentance is not sufficient at the level of consciousness alone; it must be realized in concrete policies such as a moratorium on concrete construction and the rewilding of papyrus. In other words, ecological repentance integrates the spiritual and material dimensions, as is always emphasized in Islamic ethics that

faith must be proven through deeds. Previous research by Fazlun Khalid and Mustafa Abu Sway has formulated the concept of *fiqh al-bi'ah*, which grants legal rights to ecosystems; however, this study goes further by demonstrating that legal reconstruction must begin with linguistic and interpretive reconstruction. Without restoring the meaning of the word *Yam* as a mighty entity, all environmental regulations will lose their cosmological and theological foundations, making them vulnerable to being violated for the sake of short-term economic interests.

To conclude this discussion, this study asserts that the environmental crisis in the Nile Delta is not a technical crisis but a crisis of interpretation. When *Yam* is no longer understood as the “Army of God” but merely as “ordinary water,” the final moral barrier to submerging papyrus beneath layers of concrete vanishes. Therefore, every environmental conservation effort in the Muslim world must begin with the preservation of language and meaning—with the restoration of the authority of sacred words like *Yam* into the collective consciousness of the faithful. This study has limitations in its spatial scope, which is focused on the Nile Delta, and its temporal scope, which is limited to the period 2016–2026. Further research could expand the analysis to other sacred words such as *bahr*, *nahr*, or *wadi* in different ecosystem contexts, as well as test the effectiveness of papyrus rewilding programs as a medium for teaching ecological interpretation in religious educational institutions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the ecological crisis in the Nile Delta during the 2016–2026 period is not solely caused by technical or demographic factors, but is rooted in a crisis of interpretation regarding sacred texts. The shift in the meaning of the word *Yam* (يَم) from a theological entity that is active and authoritative (as the “army of God” that drowned Pharaoh) to merely neutral hydrological data has eroded the sense of *khauf* (fear) and human reverence for nature.

Consequently, massive physical development (concretization, land reclamation) in the Nile Delta has received implicit legitimization from a positivistic-modern perspective. The habitat of *Cyperus papyrus* which serves as a physical marker of the prophetic narrative has been destroyed. This extinction has caused systematic amnesia: future generations have lost the empirical anchor to believe the story of Prophet Moses as a real event, so that the story is reduced to mere myth.

Thus, this study offers the concept of “Ecological Repentance” (*al-tawbah al-ikūlūjiyyah*) as a theo-ecological solution. Ecological repentance signifies the return of human epistemology from a materialist-positivist worldview toward a classical worldview that recognizes nature as God’s signs (*ayat*)—possessing authority and the right to be preserved. The salvation of the Nile ecosystem must begin with the decolonization of the interpretation of sacred texts, not merely through technical solutions alone.

FURTHER STUDY

This study still has limitations, so further research on Decolonizing the Meaning of Yam: The Ecological Crisis of the Nile Delta and the Erosion of Prophetic Memory in Modern ExegesisFull is needed to refine this study and enhance the insights of readers and the authors.

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