

The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures

Abdullah Saeed

*University of Melbourne
Victoria, Australia*

A significant point of tension between Muslims and those whom the Qurʾān calls “the People of the Book” (that is, Jews and Christians) is the Qurʾānic accusation that the scriptures of Jews and Christians have been falsified, corrupted, altered and changed, and are therefore not to be relied on as the “word of God” in any matters of religion, faith or law.¹ There are three broad approaches to this among Muslims: (a) the scriptures of Jews and Christians of which the Qurʾān approves as uncorrupted are only those that were actually revealed to Moses (*Tawrāt* or Torah) and Jesus (*Injīl* or Gospel), not those that existed with the Jews and Christians at the time of the Prophet Muḥammad or exist today; (b) significant parts of the scriptures that exist today are distorted and corrupted and it is difficult to know which these are; (c) there are no uncorrupted scriptures of Jews and Christians remaining today — those that the Qurʾān refers to as *Tawrāt* or *Injīl* have been obliterated. This last appears to be the most popular and widely-held view. Although the Qurʾān makes clear its respect for both *Tawrāt* and *Injīl*, these Muslims claim a number of Qurʾānic verses as the basis for their conviction that these scriptures as they exist today have been corrupted.

There is no doubt that the Qurʾān refers to certain “distortions” of the scriptures by some groups of the People of the Book. Terms used for this vary, but the most obvious is *taḥrīf*. Scholars of *tafsīr* have explored verses in which *taḥrīf* and other related terms are used. Unlike the vast majority of Muslims, these *tafsīr* scholars appear to be more cautious in their assessment of the issue of “distortion.” This article briefly explores how a number of interpreters of the Qurʾān, namely Ṭabarī, Qurṭubī, Rāzī, Ibn Taymiyya and Quṭb, have treated this issue.

References to “Distortion”

There are a number of instances in the Qurʾān that appear to indicate that there was some “distortion” of parts of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, either of the meaning of the text or in some cases of some parts of the text itself. One of the terms used is *baddala*, which means to change, exchange or substitute. The Qurʾān says:

But the transgressors changed (*fa baddala alladhīnā ḡalamū*) the word from that which had been given them; so We sent on the transgressors a plague from heaven, for that they infringed [Our command] repeatedly.²

On “*fa baddala alladhīnā ḡalamū*,” Ṭabarī sees *baddala* (to change or exchange) as meaning changing how a word is uttered or pronounced, for instance, the change of the word *ḡittab* to *ḡinṡab* would be an example.³ There is also a reference in the Qurʾān to some people (apparently a reference to certain Jewish scholars) writing something and then attributing it to God, but without specifying what that is:

Then woe to those who write the Book with their own hands, and then say: ‘This is from God,’ to traffic with it for a miserable price! Woe to them for what their hands do write, and for the gain they make thereby.⁴

The Qurʾān also makes reference to a form of distortion in recitation whose purpose is to give a false impression to the listener that what is being recited is the word of God:

There is among them a section who distort the Book with their tongues: [As they read] you would think it is a part of the Book, but it is no part of the Book; and they say, ‘That is from God,’ but it is not from God: It is they who tell a lie against God, and [well] they know it!⁵

Of the terms related to “distortion” and “corruption” of the text used in the Qurʾān, the popular Muslim view takes the derivatives of the term *ṡaḡrīf* as the basis of its insistence on the deliberate falsification of *Tawrāt* and *Injīl* by Jews and Christians, respectively.

There are four Qurʾanic verses which use derivatives of the term *ṡaḡrīf*:

Have you any hope that they will be true to you when a party of them used to listen to the word of Allah, then used to change it (*yuharrifūnāḡ*), after they had understood it, knowingly?⁶

Of the Jews, there are those who displace words (*yuharrifūnā al-kalīma*) from their [right] places, and say,

‘We hear and we disobey’; and ‘Hear what is not heard’; and ‘*Rāʾīna*’,⁷ with a twist of their tongues and a slander to faith. If only they had said:

'We hear and we obey'; and 'Do hear'; and 'Do look at us'; it would have been better for them, and more proper; but God hath cursed them for their unbelief; and but few of them will believe.⁸

But because of their breach of their covenant, we Muslims cursed them, and made their hearts grow hard; they change the words (*yuharrifūnā al-kalima*) from their [right] places and forget a good part of the message that was sent them; nor wilt thou cease to find them — barring a few — ever bent on [new] deceits: but forgive them, and overlook [their misdeeds]: for God loveth those who are kind.⁹

Apostle! Let not those grieve thee, who race each other into unbelief: [whether it be] among those who say "We believe" with their lips but whose hearts have no faith; or it be among the Jews — men who will listen to any lie — will listen even to others who have never so much as come to thee. They change the words (*yuharrifūnā al-kalima*) from their [right] times and places: they say, 'If ye are given this, take it, but if not, beware!' If anyone's trial is intended by God, thou hast no authority in the least for him against God. For such, it is not God's will to purify their hearts. For them there is disgrace in this world, and in the Hereafter a heavy punishment.¹⁰

***Tabrīf* Defined**

Tabrīf is defined as "corruption of a document, whereby the original sense is altered. It may happen in various ways: by direct alteration of the written text; by arbitrary alterations in reading aloud a text which is itself correct; by omission or interpolation; or by a wrong exposition of the true sense."¹¹ Ṭabarī, Qurtubī, Rāzī, Ibn Taymiyya and Quṭb, whose commentaries are the focus of this article, vary in their ideas on *tabrīf* as to where the balance of interpretation lies, i.e., with changing the words or the meaning. In his interpretation of Q2:75, Razi defines *tabrīf* as follows: *Tabrīf* is change and alteration. It comes from *inbiraf*, which is turning away from something or departing from something.¹² He goes on to say, relying on another source:

Tabrīf will be either in the word (*al-lafẓ*) or meaning (*al-ma'na*). It is better to interpret *tabrīf* as alteration (*taghyīr*) of the word (*al-lafẓ*) than to interpret it as alteration of the meaning (*al-ma'na*), because for The Most High (*ta'āla*) God's speech (*kalām*), if it remained as it was and if they changed its interpretation (*ta'wil*), they would be changing its meaning (*ma'nābu*), not the [actual] speech which is heard (*al-kalām al-masmū'*). If it is possible to accept that interpretation [that is, changing of *lafẓ* not *ma'na*] as narrated by Ibn 'Abbās, [according to whom] they added to it and omitted from it [the Book], this [interpretation that is, change of the words] would be better. If that [interpretation] is not possible [that is, change of words], it must be interpreted as altering the interpretation of it [the Book] even though the

revelation (*al-tanzīl*) is established and fixed (*thābitan*). [This interpretation, that is, alteration of words] is impossible (*yamtani'*) if the speech of God has been manifested to a large number of people (*mutawatiran*), like the manifestation of the Qur'ān. But before it becomes such, alteration of the words is not impossible.¹³

Rāzī makes a distinction between *tabrīf lafzī* (changing the text) and *tabrīf ma 'nawī* (changing the meaning, that is, the interpretation). He is not definitive on the nature of *tabrīf* that occurs here; he is raising the possibility of both. Rāzī seems to be saying that only before a scripture became well known to a large number of followers was such changing of the text possible, perhaps indicating that change of the text of a scripture of a religious community is possible only at a very early stage in the history of that community when the number of followers are very few and the text of the scripture is not well-known.

When This *Tabrīf* Took Place

Rāzī raises the possibility of this *tabrīf* either at the time of Moses or at the time of Prophet Muḥammad. This is related to the object of *tabrīf*: the distortion of what was received by Moses during his lifetime or the texts in *Tawrāt*, which presumably referred to the prophethood of Muḥammad. In most cases, debates on *tabrīf* apparently were intertwined with the connotation that the Jews and Christians simply distorted the references to the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad in their scriptures. Rāzī goes on to say that if this *tabrīf* had occurred at the time of Moses, that is unlikely to be related to the texts concerning Prophet Muḥammad whereas if the *tabrīf* occurred at the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, it would be referring to the interpretation of texts related to the coming of Prophet Muḥammad and his prophethood or to certain laws, such as the law of adultery. He then says, "The apparent meaning (*zābir*) of the Qur'ān does not indicate the nature of what they distorted (*ḥarrafū*)"¹⁴

On the question of who was engaged in *tabrīf*, the term *fariqun* (group, party) used in the verse (Q2:75) is not specific on who they are. According to Rāzī, some of those engaged in *tabrīf* could be at the time of Moses, and some at the time of Prophet Muḥammad. According to Mujāhid (as reported by Ṭabarī), it was the "*ulamā*" among the Jews.¹⁵ Al-Sudiyy briefly states, "Those who change it and those who write it [the scripture] are their [Jewish] '*ulamā*'."¹⁶ Having quoted some of the views of others, Ṭabarī takes the position that the *tabrīf* was done by a group of people at the time of Moses, who heard the word of God from Moses but, having heard and understood, altered it.¹⁷ If this change took place during the time of Moses, the Prophet who received the words from God, it is extremely unlikely that any "change"

or “distortion” by some renegades from among Moses’ followers would have been given any kind of authority; the text of the word of God would have remained intact and well-known to both Moses and his true followers.

Qurtubī sees some weakness Ṭabarī’s perspective.¹⁸ Qurtubī (following Mujahid and al-Sudiyy) maintains that those who made alterations were “*ulamā*” of the Jews who altered *Tawrāt* and made its *ḥarām* as *ḥalāl* and its *ḥalāl* as *ḥarām*, following their whims.¹⁹ Rāzī, in his interpretation of Q2:75, does not give a definite answer to when this *taḥrīf* took place but makes the comment that, if we say that those who committed *taḥrīf* (*al-mubarrifīn*) were in the time of Moses, it is most unlikely that what they changed was related to the prophethood of Muḥammad. On the other hand, if we say that those who changed were in the time of Prophet Muḥammad, it is more likely that the *taḥrīf* occurred in relation to the [texts] related to Prophet Muḥammad. Examples of such alterations would be the description of the Prophet or the law related to adultery.²⁰ Sayyid Quṭb provides a clearer explanation of this by saying that the party (*farīq*) referred to in the verse Q2:75 is the

... most knowledgeable of the Jews and most knowledgeable of them with the Truth revealed to them in their Book, that is the scholars (*abbār*) and rabbis who hear the Speech of God revealed to their Prophet Moses in *Tawrāt*. They then alter it [*yuharrifūnabū ‘an mawāḍi‘ihī*] and interpret it using far-fetched interpretations which remove it from its [intended] scope [of meaning].²¹

It seems that for Quṭb, the distortion referred to here is primarily by the scholars in the area of interpretation. There is thus no clear-cut view among these scholars on when this *taḥrīf* took place. Reference to *taḥrīf* by scholars indicate that it took place sometime after the Prophet Moses’ death.

***Tabrīf* in Meaning or Wording**

The question whether *taḥrīf* of scripture was in the meaning or the wording is not clearly decided in the *tafsīr* literature. In the context of interpreting Q2:75, Ṭabarī explains *yuharrifūnabū* as “they alter its meaning (*ma‘nābu*); that is, they change its direction, and its meaning to another meaning.”²² For Ibn Zayd, as reported in Ṭabarī, the Jews altered and changed *Tawrāt* by making its *ḥalāl* as *ḥarām* and *ḥarām* as *ḥalāl*, truth as falsehood and falsehood as truth.²³ Later on, Ṭabarī implies that the alteration of meaning is more likely,²⁴ which seems to confirm that he saw *taḥrīf* as related to the meaning of the text, not the actual text itself.

Rāzī, in his treatment of Q4:46, states three ways in which *taḥrīf* could occur. The first, by “changing a word for another like their placing of the word ‘*adam tawīl*’ in place of ‘*rab‘ab*’ in *Tawrāt* . . .”²⁵ He addresses any objection to this by saying:

[First] if it is said, how is this [change] possible for a Book whose letters and words are known to such a large number of people in the East and West, we would say: It is perhaps possible to say that [initially the number of] people were few and those who had the knowledge of the scripture ('*ulamā'*) were extremely small, and therefore they were able to cause this change (*taḥrīf*).²⁶

Rāzī then continues to explain the meaning of *taḥrīf* and various possibilities:

Secondly, what is meant by *taḥrīf* is to cast false and doubtful [statements], to give false interpretations, and to change the true meaning of a word to a false meaning using various linguistic tricks, as is done by the people of innovation in our time with regard to the [Qur'ānic] verses that are not in line with their schools [*madhāhib*]. This is the most correct [interpretation].²⁷ Thirdly, [the meaning is that] they [the Jews] used to meet the Prophet [May God's blessing be upon him] and ask him about things and he informed them . . . when they left, they changed his words.²⁸

In order to make his point clearer, in his interpretation of '*an mawāḍi'ihī*', he goes further:

If we interpret *taḥrīf* as false interpretations (*al-ta'wīlāt al-bāṭilab*), the meaning of '*yuharrifūnā al-kalimā 'an mawāḍi'ihī*' mentioned here [Q4:46] is that they attribute (*yadhkuruna*) false interpretations to those texts. There is no statement to indicate that they take a particular word [*tilka al-lafzab*] out of the Book.²⁹

But immediately after this, he suggests that the alteration of the word (parts of the actual text of the Book) is possible, based on the verse [Q5:41], where the term "*min ba'dī mawāḍi'ihī*" is used:

As for the verse mentioned in *Sūrah al-Mā'idah* [Q5:41], it indicates that they combined the two forms [of *taḥrīf*]: they used to give false interpretations [to texts] and they used to take words [*al-lafz*] out of the Book.³⁰

On balance, however, Rāzī does not give a definite view on this. The possibility of both types of *taḥrīf* exist but he seems to be leaning towards the *taḥrīf* of meaning.

For Ṭabarī, the *taḥrīf* in Q4:46 means that the Jews change the meaning [of *Tawrāt*] through interpretation.³¹ For Qurṭubī, *yuharrifūnā* (Q4:46) also means giving an incorrect interpretation (*yata'awwalūnahū 'ala gbayrī ta'wīlibī*). He seems to relate this *taḥrīf* to the "description of the Prophet" in the scripture [of Jews].³² Even for Quṭb, the *taḥrīf* is related to their interpretations:

The preferred view is that [this refers to] their interpretation of texts from the *Tawrāt* in ways that were not intended (*ya 'nī tawīlubūm li'ibarati al-tawrāt bi għayr al-maqṣūd minhā*) [by God]. This is [in order] to reject what exists in it [*Tawrāt*] of signs of the last message [of the Prophet], and the rules and laws which are confirmed by the last Book [Qur'ān].³³

For Quṭb, attributing false interpretations is not characteristic of Jews only, but of “people of religion” who take this as a profession and who follow their whims, and of people of power. Quṭb also saw this as a serious problem even with Muslims of today,³⁴ clearly implying that *taḥrīf* refers to false interpretations, as Muslims are not accused of “altering” the text of the Qur'ān.

In his interpretation of Q5:13 and Q5:41, Rāzī also gives preference to the view that *taḥrīf* is false interpretation. As noted above, his preference stems from the belief that changes to the words of a transmitted Book by a large number of people (*bi al-tawātur*) is not likely to occur.³⁵ In relation to Q5:41, Rāzī cites the alleged instance of the punishment for adultery being falsely interpreted as flogging instead of stoning.³⁶ He argues that the Jews changed,

the word (*kalām*) of their Lord, who revealed it to their prophet Moses (Peace be upon him), which is *Tawrāt*. They change it and write by their hands what God Most High did not reveal to their Prophet, and they say to ignorant people: ‘This is the word of God which He revealed to his Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) and *Tawrāt* which He revealed to him.’ This is among the characteristics of generations of Jews who came after Moses, of whom some existed during the time of our Prophet Muḥammad (Peace be upon him).³⁷

Ṭabarī seems to imply here that what is referred to is a change of the text through false interpretations, writing down those interpretations and then attributing them to God. At the same time, he mentions Ibn ‘Abbās, according to whom this *taḥrīf* is related to “the *ḥudūd* [punishments specified] by God in *Tawrāt*,”³⁸ possibly a reference to the reported concealment of the punishment of stoning. This leaves the possibility of both forms of *taḥrīf* (in words and meaning) but perhaps more leaning towards *taḥrīf* in meaning in the form of attributing false interpretations to God.

In his commentary on verse Q5:13, Qurṭubī emphasizes that the reference to *taḥrīf* could be related to the alteration of either word or meaning. For him, “They [the Jews] interpret [texts] wrongly and provide the common people with these false interpretations”; and further, “It is said that its meaning is changing of the letters [of the text].” Again, Qurṭubī refers to the two instances, i.e., changing the description of the Prophet and the verse related to the stoning of those who commit adultery.³⁹ Quṭb (perhaps reflecting the views of

Ṭabarī and others) also suggests that the two forms of alteration (meaning and word) are associated with the meaning of *taḥrīf* here and is extremely critical of the Jews. He goes on to say in explaining verse Q5:13:

Their [Jews'] nature is [that they engage in] changing of the words as well as their scripture, first, from the shape in which God revealed it to Moses (Peace be upon him) either by adding many of [the texts] which support their distorted objectives or justifying them by texts falsely attributed to God, or by interpreting extant original texts in line with their whims and interest and wicked objectives, or by forgetting and ignoring the commandments of their religion and law and not implementing them in their life and society.⁴⁰

In Q5:41, *taḥrīf* as understood by these interpreters, is not apparently “omission” of a text but false interpretation of the text. At the worst, if the story is to be accepted, it is concealing what exists in the Book. In interpreting Q5:41, Ṭabarī relies on the story of the adultery of the two Jews and the Prophet’s alleged inquiring into the punishment set down in *Tawrāt*. Ṭabarī mentions several versions of the story. He sees *taḥrīf* here as changing the law of God, which was apparently revealed in *Tawrāt* in relation to the adulterers; that is, for example, changing the punishment from *rajm* (stoning) to *jald* (flogging).⁴¹ This is, again, not a change in the actual text but an obscuring of the actual law. Rāzī also states that verse Q5:41 was revealed in response to the Prophet’s inquiring about the punishment of stoning. He goes on to say of the meaning of *yuharrifūnā al-kalima min ba’di mawāḍi’ihī* that they [Jews] replaced *al-rajm* (stoning) with *al-jald* (flogging).⁴² If this story is reliable, this is more like concealing what was actually in the text and not revealing it, not an actual change of the words. Qurṭubī relies on the story in interpreting the verse as attributing a wrong interpretation to the text.⁴³ Quṭb also cites the traditional story but does not give a specific meaning to the verse.⁴⁴

On the interpretation of a related verse *fa waylun li allādhīnā yaktubūnā al-kitābā bi aydihim* (Q2:79), Ṭabarī seems to be of the view that the people referred to are from among the Jews of *Banū Isrā’īl*, who “distorted” (*harrāfū*) the Book of Allah and wrote a book [which contained] their interpretations. These were opposed (*mukhālifīn*) to what Allah had revealed to his prophet Moses (peace be upon him). According to him, the Jews then “sold” (communicated) this book to a people who had no knowledge either of what the book contained or of *Tawrāt*.⁴⁵ The form of distortion that Ṭabarī seems to refer to in this instance is that of writing down certain interpretations and attributing them to Allah, not changing a written text (word of God).

Distortion by Concealing the Text

In the interpretation of verse Q2:174 (*innā allādhīnā yaktumūnā*), Ṭabarī thinks that the verse refers to Jewish scholars who concealed (*katāmū*) the truth about Prophet Muḥammad, even though they knew of references to the prophethood of Muḥammad in their *Tawrāt*.⁴⁶ In one report by al-Sudiyy, what the Jews concealed was “the name of Muḥammad (peace be upon him)”⁴⁷ (presumably written in the *Tawrāt*). Again, there is no reference to changing the text of *Tawrat*, but of “concealing” it. There are no details as to how this concealment took place.

Another verse, Q2:159, (*innā allādhīnā yaktumūnā mā anzalna*) is interpreted by Ṭabarī as referring to the Jewish and Christian scholars.⁴⁸ They are said to have concealed the issue (*amr*) of Muḥammad, which is allegedly spelled out in *Tawrāt* and *Injīl* and represents not only the proof and evidence related to the prophethood of Muḥammad, but also to his description (*ṣifātubū*) in both scriptures. Concealment perhaps means not recognizing either Muḥammad or the “signs” apparently mentioned in both scriptures. Later on, Ṭabarī says that the verse refers to anyone who conceals knowledge (*ilm*) which Allah has commanded to be conveyed to the people.⁴⁹

Emphasizing the relevance of concealment in relation to *taḥrīf*, Ṭabarī quotes several views on the occasion of the revelation of Q5:41. Some of them have references to the punishment for adultery and the attempts reportedly made by certain Jewish scholars in Medina to “conceal” the punishment of stoning;⁵⁰ others make reference to whether the punishment for murder should be *diyab* (blood money) or *qatl* (execution).⁵¹ In both cases, it could be said that these Jewish scholars were apparently attempting to “conceal” the true nature of the punishment for these offenses as revealed in *Tawrāt*. Ṭabarī, however, concludes that his preferred view is that the verse was revealed about a group of *munāfiqun* (hypocrites).⁵² If this is the case, then, the verse has nothing to do with any actual altering of scripture. The *munāfiqun* did not have the ability to change the actual text of the Qurʾān, as is universally agreed. If this is related to the Jewish scholars, as is indicated in some reports, it appears to be related to “concealing” of the actual rule, perhaps through false interpretation of a ruling in *Tawrāt* or by ignoring that ruling.

Distortion “with their tongues”

The Qurʾān says,

There is among them a section who distort (*yahwūnā*) the Book with their tongues: [As they read] you would think it is a part of the Book, but it is no part of the Book; and they say, ‘That is from God,’ but it is not from God: It is they who tell a lie against God, and [well] they know it!⁵³

In the interpretation of this verse, Qurṭubī gives the meaning of *yalwūnā* as distortion by changing what is intended by the text (*yuharrifūnā al-kalima wa ya'diluna bibī 'an al-qaṣd*).⁵⁴ The verse is clearly referring to distortion of the text or its meaning through speech (with their tongues); that is, either reading what is not from scripture as though it were (perhaps in Hebrew), or giving the Prophet, who did not understand Hebrew, the same false impression.

Ṭabarī also gives the meaning of *yalwūnā* as *yuharrifūnā*, and then provides corroborating reports.⁵⁵ One of these, by Qatādah, says: They [Jews] “distorted the Book of Allah and [introduced] innovations into that and, then, they alleged that those [innovations] are from Allah.” Ibn ‘Abbās reportedly said: “They [Jews] used to add to the Book of Allah what Allah did not reveal.” Both views appear to be related to additions or “interpretations” and then attributing them to God.

In Q4:46 again, the Qur’ān speaks of people distorting by “twisting of their tongues” (*layyan bi alsinatihim*). Yusuf Ali explains this as follows:

‘*Rā’ina*’ if used respectfully in the Arabic way would have meant ‘Please attend to us.’ With a twist of their tongue, they suggested an insulting meaning, such as ‘O though that takest us to pasture!’ or, in Hebrew, ‘Our bad one!’⁵⁶

Based on this, it could be said that this verse appears to indicate *tahriḥ* by deceitful distortion of the language of communication. This “tongue-twisting” means that those referred to in the verse would use perfectly appropriate words in a meaning not immediately obvious to the hearer.

Difficulties for Muslim Scholars

Many Muslims appear to have been puzzled by the diversity of Qur’ānic references to *tahriḥ* and the apparent reverence the Qur’ān shows to the scriptures of Jews and Christians. The Qur’ān shows utmost reverence to these scriptures and never places any disparaging statements about the “Books,” which are referred to as “coming from God.” The concept of a “book from God,” which was revealed to Moses and Jesus, is paramount in the Qur’ānic references to both Jews and Christians.

The “Book” is said to contain wisdom, guidance and light:

And in their footsteps We sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the *Tawrāt* that had come before him: We sent him the Gospel: therein was guidance and light, and confirmation of the *Tawrāt* that had come before him: a guidance and an admonition to those who fear God.⁵⁷

In the context of Jewish tradition, the rabbis and doctors of law are entrusted with the protection of God’s Book:

It was We who revealed the *Tawrāt* [to Moses]: therein was guidance and light. By its standard have been judged the Jews, by the prophets who bowed [as in Islam] to God's will, by the rabbis and the doctors of law: for to them was entrusted the protection of God's book, and they were witnesses thereto: therefore fear not men, but fear me, and sell not my signs for a miserable price. If any do fail to judge by [the light of] what God hath revealed, they are [no better than] Unbelievers.⁵⁸

The Jews are asked by God why they are coming to the Prophet Muḥammad for a judgment while *they have with them* another Book of God, an obvious reference to *Tawrāt*, which was indeed what existed with the Jewish community of Medina at the time of the Prophet:

But why do they come to thee for decision, when they have [their own] *Tawrāt* before them? Therein is the [plain] command of God; yet even after that, they would turn away. For they are not [really] People of Faith.⁵⁹

People of *Injīl* are commanded to judge with what they have in the *Injīl*, a reference to the scripture as it existed at the time of Prophet Muḥammad:

Let the people of the *Injīl* judge by what God hath revealed therein. If any do fail to judge by [the light of] what God hath revealed, they are [no better than] those who rebel.⁶⁰

The Qurʾān revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad is said to “confirm what is with them.”⁶¹ Obviously, this refers to a text that existed with the Jewish or Christian communities at the time of the Prophet. The People of the Book are described as reciting “verses of Allah.”⁶² Many verses in the Qurʾān refer to the People of the Book as ones to whom God “gave the Book,”⁶³ and who are asked “to establish *Tawrāt* and *Injīl*.”⁶⁴ The Jews at the time of the Prophet are readers of the scripture⁶⁵ as are the Christians.⁶⁶

In no verse in the Qurʾān is there a denigrating remark about the scriptures of the Jews and the Christians. Instead, there is respect and reverence. Any disparaging remarks were about the People of the Book, individuals or groups, and their actions. These and many other verses which similarly revere the “Book of God” (*Tawrāt* or *Injīl*), as given to Jews and Christians, led scholars like Ibn Taymiyya to consider unwarranted the wholesale rejection by Muslims of the Christian and Jewish scriptures.⁶⁷

For Ibn Taymiyya, in verse Q5:47, for instance, Christians are commanded to judge according to what was revealed in *Injīl*. Since this *ayah* is addressing Christians of the time of Prophet Muḥammad, it must refer to the *Injīl* that they possessed at that time, the early seventh century CE. Both the Eastern and

Western branches of Christianity had by that time adopted certain gospels, which must be the scriptures to which the Qur'ān refers or at least texts which are contained in these gospels. Similarly, in the same context, the Qur'ān asks of the Jews: "But why do they come to thee for decision, when they have [their own] Law [*Tawrāt*] before them?"⁶⁸ Again, the Qur'ān must be referring to the *Tawrāt* in the stewardship of the Jews at that time, not to something that existed, as many Muslims claim, at the time of the Prophet Moses. Referring to the divergent views among Muslims on this issue, Ibn Taymiyya says:

It is said that in the world there is no single copy [or version of the scripture] that corresponds to what God revealed in *Tawrāt* and *Injil*. All that exist are changed (*mubaddal*). As for *Tawrāt*, its transmission from a large number of people to a [subsequent] large number of people has stopped and the *Injil* is taken from four [people].

Then, among these people [Muslims] there are those who allege (*za'ama*) that much of what is in *Tawrāt* and *Injil* [today] is false (*bāṭil*), not of God's word (*kalām allah*). Some of them said that what is false is not much. It is [also said]: No one has changed any text of the scriptures. Rather they [Jews and Christians] have falsified their meanings by [false] interpretations. Many Muslims have held both of these views. The correct [view] is the third view, which is that in the world there are true (*ṣaḥīḥ*) copies [versions], and these remained until the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him), and many copies [versions] which are corrupted. Whoever says that nothing in [these] copies [versions] was corrupted he has denied what cannot be denied. Whoever says that, after the Prophet (peace be upon him), all copies [versions] have been corrupted (*hurriḥat*), he has said what is manifestly false (*khāṭa'*). The Qur'ān commands them to judge with what Allah revealed in *Tawrāt* and *Injil*. [Allah] informs that in both there is wisdom (*ḥikmah*). There is nothing in the Qur'ān to indicate that they altered all copies [versions].⁶⁹

Ibn Taymiyya also provides a basis for understanding what should be considered the "word of God" in the existing scriptures of both Jews and Christians. For him, the word of God is represented by "what the messengers report from God," not what scribes have written after the death of the messenger, for instance, about the life and times of a prophet.⁷⁰ He clarifies this by saying:

What is in *Injil* of stories about the crucifixion of Jesus, his death, his coming to the disciples after he was 'raised,' are not what Jesus said. Rather they are [reports] from those who saw those things after him. What God revealed was what was heard [directly] from Jesus who is the transmitter [of God's word] from Him.⁷¹

Muslim Understandings of Scripture and Revelation

It seems that the Muslim understanding of the term *yuharrifunā* is based on a number of things. First, the concept of scripture in Islam as, *literally*, the words of God (exactly as they were revealed and in the same language in which they were revealed) appears to be somewhat different from that in both Judaism and Christianity. For many Muslims, for instance, the Qurʾān is not the Word of God in a metaphorical sense but it is literally so; it is the actual speech of God, which came through the angel to the Prophet in the form of direct divine instructions and guidance to human beings on how to live in this world. The angel (the medium through which revelation occurred, as most Muslims believe) is said to have brought God's messages faithfully, in the language of the Prophet without distortion or change. The Prophet in turn received those messages and conveyed them as accurately as they came to him. His followers then took the messages and compiled them into a form of book, in which the only messages are those messages conveyed by God to the Prophet.⁷²

The generally accepted Muslim concept of scripture is based on the dictation theory of revelation. This would immediately reject as Word or God any human speech or narrative attributed to God; God's word is only what comes directly from God. Similarly, translations of the "Word of God" would not be considered "Word of God" if this strict view of "Word of God" were adopted. *From a Muslim's point of view*, Christianity and Judaism appear to be more "liberal" in their understanding of what the "Word of God" means and therefore "scripture." Their scriptures appear to include speech directly and indirectly attributed to God, as well as reports by those who witnessed the times of various prophets. For the Muslim, this view of the "Word of God" or "scripture" is rather diluted, as it does not appear to conform to the Muslim view of "Word of God" or "scripture."

A further difficulty for Muslims is that scripture as Word of God is only acceptable in the same language in which it was revealed. Thus, for Muslims, the Qurʾān is the word of God only in Arabic; a translation of the Qurʾān is not, strictly speaking, word of God. Translations are the "meanings" of the Qurʾān and are not relied upon, for instance, in recitation for the purpose of worship, say, in *ṣalāt* (prayer). This Muslim concept of scripture seemed to have evolved in the course of the first and second centuries AH. Once it had been developed into a theological statement, it became a cardinal point of belief. It follows that this view of scripture, based as it is on the dictation theory of revelation in its purest form, would make it easy to reject non-Qurʾanic scriptures extant at the time of the Prophet as "distorted."

The Qurʾān itself, however, seems to have taken a rather broader view of "Book of God." Perhaps the Qurʾān took into account the circumstances in

which earlier revelations were given to the prophets before Muḥammad: circumstances which perhaps did not facilitate the “documentation” of the word of God as “book” during the lifetime of the prophet or immediately after. Nor does it seem that the Qurʾān considered such recording as necessary to its understanding of what a scripture (*kitāb*) is. If the communities to whom Moses and Jesus were sent were largely illiterate and perhaps dependent on oral transmission of the “Word of God,” an oral tradition would have been perfectly acceptable as a medium for transmission of God’s Word. If, in the process of narration and translation, some “Words of God” were mingled with “words of human beings,” the texts would still retain their strong connection to the “original” revelation and the authority vested in that revelation. Even translations of the revelation would be considered “Word of God.” The focus is on the message, not on the actual format of the text, its language or narrative. But for many Muslims, this is a significantly diluted view of “Word of God” or “scripture.”

There appear to be many reasons why Muslims had developed their particular conception of the scripture, which remained dominant in the psyche of Muslims. One was a direct result of the early experience of Muslims with the Qurʾān. For Muslims, the Qurʾān, as revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad, was written down during his lifetime, as the Prophet seemed to make a habit of dictating the messages he received from God. Tradition holds that a number of scribes remained working with the Prophet, though on an *ad hoc* basis, writing down the revelations as they occurred. It is perhaps more plausible to suggest that regular recording of the revelation took place somewhat later in the Prophet’s mission. In the early period of the mission, the revelations were often short, easily remembered, and able to be repeated frequently, in the *ṣalāt*, for example. Also, at this early stage, the idea of “mission” had not yet taken root in the small community of believers in Mecca with whom the Prophet was associated. It is for these reasons that it is possible to suggest that there was a lack of formality when it came to the dictation of the revelation to scribes at this early stage. There may have also been too few scribes available at that time. Whatever the case may be, the point is that the Prophet, even on an *ad hoc* basis, wished to dictate the revelations so that they would not be forgotten.

Regardless of whether the dictation was *ad hoc* or formally organized, it ensured the existence of a substantial amount of written material from the revelation at the time of the Prophet’s death. Muslims also hold the view that, when the Prophet passed away, the Qurʾān was collected either in the memory of Muslims or as a written text or a combination of both. Although the memorizing of the revelation and oral transmission should perhaps be given priority in understanding its status at that time, a combination of written

texts and retention of the revelation in the memories of key companions of the Prophet cannot be readily discounted. From the time of the Prophet's death, Muslims had a book or at least a conception of a book; this was the Qur'ān, which included *only* the speech of God or the messages of God to the Prophet, to the exclusion of any statements or instructions even from the Prophet himself. Thus, a strict and clear separation was made right from the very beginning between the actual word of God and the word of any other source.

A second reason for the dominance of the dictation theory of revelation among Muslims is the power such an idea gives them. If the religion is based on God's revelation, and if this revelation is manifested in the form of scripture, then the purity of the religion should be based on the purity of the scripture. If Muslims could argue that their scripture was the "purest" available for any religious group, including the Jews and Christians, doubtless on the basis of criteria adopted by Muslims, then it followed that the earlier religious traditions, whose scriptures were somewhat flawed according to these criteria, were following a less than pure religious tradition. This gave an important psychological weapon to Muslims against the People of the Book, particularly in the time of ascendancy of Muslims as a political and military power in the period of the conquests, which took place notably in the first and second centuries of Islam. Muslims often conquered areas that were dominated by Christians, and, in turn, had to confront certain hostility towards their religious tradition. In this, this psychological weapon appears to have been useful.

In the first and second centuries of Islam, disputes arose between Muslims and Christians, in particular about the relative strength and "purity" of their religions. In Christianity, Muslims faced a theologically sophisticated religious tradition whose experienced theologians would argue against Muslims, using logic, philosophy and theology to support their beliefs on such issues as the Trinity and the son-ship of Jesus. Muslims would be left only with answers on the basis of their scripture alone, as many of them had not then mastered disciplines such as logic and philosophy. Theological sophistication and argumentation were yet to flourish. A contest between an established religious tradition such as Christianity would have created an imbalance and a certain sense of insecurity on the part of the religious tradition which had not then used the methods of argumentation the established tradition is using. This is not to suggest that Muslims as a whole believed that they were less sophisticated and secure in their faith; they were fortified by their belief in the purity of their scripture and therefore of their religion, and by their certainty that Allah was "on their side." For them, the conquests that took place in the first century of Islam demonstrated this.

In dealing with the problem of distortion, scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya were aware of the challenges Muslims faced in asserting that the Jews and Christians had completely corrupted their scriptures, not the least of which was the obvious lack, in the Qurʾān, of any kind of attack on either *Tawrāt* or *Injīl*. The Qurʾān consistently refers to these texts as the “Book of God,” revealed to Moses and Jesus. But Ibn Taymiyya seems to resolve the problem by claiming the existence of “uncorrupted” books somewhere at the time of the Prophet. We know from the history of these two religious traditions that by the time the Prophet was preaching in the early seventh century CE, the scriptures of both Jews and Christians were documented. The *Tawrāt* they had at the time is what they have now. The same is true for the Gospels. Since the Qurʾān refers to those same scriptures, its references to them should equally apply in the modern era. This is perhaps the main challenge to Ibn Taymiyya’s position.

Conclusion

Although the possibility of textual corruption of the Jewish and Christian scriptures in small sections (changing a word or a phrase but not wholesale or large scale deliberate falsification) existed, almost all interpreters whose views are explored herein seem to have seen the corruption as *largely* lying with interpretation: for example, changing *ḥalāl* to *ḥarām* or vice versa; and concealing or obscuring what exists in the scripture to confuse others, as in the case of verse 5:41. Large-scale and deliberate commission and omission, in the case of texts that have a long tradition of transmission and are widely and thoroughly known, would be difficult. Rāzī and Qurṭubī, in particular, seem to hold this view. Even if there is textual corruption associated with interpretation, the actual scriptures can still be relied upon and considered “Books of God.” For the Qurʾān, the concept of the “Book of God” was appropriately used to the scriptures of Jews and Christians even though these may not be from the Muslim point of view “exactly as they were” during the time of Moses or Jesus and are, in some cases, translated from the original languages to other languages or narrated by a person other than the Prophet who received the revelation.

Since the “authorized” scriptures of Jews and Christians remain very much today as they existed at the time of the Prophet, it is difficult to argue that the Qurʾānic references to *Tawrāt* and *Injīl* were only to the “pure” *Tawrāt* and *Injīl* as existed at the time of Moses and Jesus, respectively. If the texts have remained more or less as they were in the seventh century CE, the reverence the Qurʾān has shown them at the time should be retained even today. Many interpreters of the Qurʾān, from Ṭabarī to Rāzī to Ibn Taymiyya and even Quṭb, *appear* to be inclined to share this view. The wholesale

dismissive attitude held by many Muslims in the modern period towards the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity do not seem have the support of either the Qurʾān or the major figures of *tafsīr*. Further research is required to explore the complexities associated with the doctrine of *taḥrīf* and the social, political and intellectual contexts in which this doctrine developed within Islam.

Endnotes

1. This problem is discussed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr as one of the obstacles for Christian-Muslim dialogue. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islamic-Christian Dialogue — Problems and Obstacles to be Pondered and Overcome." *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXXVIII, No. 3–4, July–October, 1998.
2. Qurʾān 2:59.
3. Ṭabarī, Abu Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl ʿay āl-Qurʾān*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1988), I, 303.
4. Qurʾān 2:79.
5. Qurʾān 3:78.
6. Qurʾān 2:75.
7. "Rāʾ ina", if used respectfully in the Arabic way, would have meant "Please attend to us." With a twist of their tongue, they suggested an insulting meaning, such as "O though that takest us to pasture!" or in Hebrew, "Our bad one!" *The Holy Qurʾān: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary, Revised version of Yusuf Ali's translation* (Medina: King Fahd Holy Qurʾān Printing Complex). See footnote 566, 225.
8. Qurʾān 4:46.
9. Qurʾān 5:13.
10. Qurʾān 5:41.
11. Article "Taḥrīf" in H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991, 560.
12. Rāzī, al-Fakhr al-, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dar Ihyaʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 3rd edition, n.d.), II, part 3, 134.
13. Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, II, part 3, 134.
14. Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, II, part 3, 135.
15. Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, I, 367.
16. Suyuṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr al-, *al-Durr al-Manṭibūr fī al-Tafsīr al-Maʿthūr* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1990), I, 157.
17. Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, I, 368.
18. Qurṭubī, Abu ʿAbd Allah Muḥammad b, Ahmad al-Anṣārī, *al-Jāmiʿ li aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1993), I, part 2, 4.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, II, part 3, 135.
21. Quṭb, Sayyid, *Fi Zilāl al-Qurʾān* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1996), I, 84.
22. Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, I, 368.
23. *Ibid.*, 367.
24. *Ibid.*, 368.
25. Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, V, part 10, 117.
26. *Ibid.*, 117–118.

27. *Ilqā' al-shubab al-bāṭilah wa al-ta'wilat al-fāsidad wa sarf al-lafz 'an ma'nāhu al-haqq ila ma'nān batil bi wujub al-biyal al-lafziyyah.* Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, V, part 10, 118.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, IV, 118.
32. Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, III, part 5, 157.
33. Quṭb, *Zūlāl*, II, 675.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, VI, part 11, 187.
36. *Ibid.*, 233.
37. Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, IV, part 6, 155.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, III, part 6, 77.
40. Quṭb, *Zūlāl*, II, 859.
41. Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, IV, part 6, 236.
42. Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, VI, part 11, 232–33.
43. Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, III, part 6, 118.
44. Quṭb, *Zūlāl*, II, 892.
45. Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, I, 378.
46. *Ibid.*, II, 89.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, II, 52.
49. *Ibid.*, 53.
50. *Ibid.*, IV, part 6, 232.
51. *Ibid.*, 231.
52. *Ibid.*, 234.
53. Qur'ān 3:78.
54. Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, II, part 4, 78.
55. Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, III, 323.
56. *The Holy Qur'ān: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary, Revised version of Yusuf Ali's translation*, 225: footnote 566.
57. Qur'ān 5:46.
58. Qur'ān 5:44.
59. Qur'ān 5:43.
60. Qur'ān 5:47.
61. Qur'ān 2:89. See also 5:48; 6:92.
62. Qur'ān 3:113.
63. Qur'ān 3:187; 4:44; 4:47; 4:131; 5:5.
64. Qur'ān 5:68.
65. Qur'ān 2:44; 2:113.
66. Qur'ān 2:113.
67. Ibn Taymiyya, Taqiyy al-Dīn, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, Edited 'Abd al-Rahman 'Umayrah, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), I, 207–209.
68. Qur'ān 5:43.
69. Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, I, 209.
70. *Ibid.*, 210.
71. *Ibid.*
72. Saeed, Abdullah "Rethinking 'Revelation' as a Precondition for Reinterpretation of the Qur'ān? A Qur'anic Perspective." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*. 1(1) 93–114.