

Section One of *The Gentle Answer* explores how the top scholars of Qur’anic Studies, both Muslim and non-Muslim, interpret the verses from the Qur’an that polemicists often use to support their accusation. Rather than accuse the Bible of corruption, Nickel’s detailed study “clearly shows that the amount of information in the Qur’an about the earlier scriptures is substantial, and its tone is always positive and reverent.”^{p.20}

The verses in which these scriptures are mentioned by name provide some of the following basic information about the Qur’anic approach to them:^{pp.22ff.}

- Allah sends down the Torah (*Tawrāt*) and the Gospel (*Injīl*) (Q 3:3).
- The Torah and the Gospel are revealed after the time of Abraham (Q 3:65).
- Subsequently, Allah teaches ‘*Isa* the Torah and the Gospel (Q 3:48, 5:110), and
- ‘*Isa* in turn confirms the truth of the Torah (Q 3:50, 61:6).
- The Gospel confirms that Torah (Q 5:46).
- The Torah contains “the command (*hukm*, حُكْم) of Allah” (Q 5:43)
- The Qur’an claims a “similitude” with the Gospel: that true believers are “like a seed that sends forth its shoot, then makes it strong, it then becomes thick, and it stands straight on its stem, delighting the sowers—that he may enrage the disbelievers with them” (Q 48:29).

Scriptures mentioned by name in the Qur’an
(Torah, the Gospel, the Psalms)

Tawrāt = 18 times (Q 3:3, 48, 50, 65 and 93^(2x); 5:43, 44, 46^(2x), 66, 68, 110; 7:157, 9:111, 48:29, 61:6; 62:5)

Injīl = 12 times (Q 3:3, 48, 65; 5:46, 47, 66, 68, 110)

Zabūr (Psalms) = 3 times (Q 4:163, 17:55, 3:184)

“None of the verses in the Qur’an that explicitly mention the names *Tawrāt*, *Injīl*, or *Zabūr* makes a negative statement about these earlier scriptures.”^{p.23}

Allah gave the messenger of Islam this advice: “*If you are in doubt about what we have sent down to you, ask those who have been reciting the Book from before you.*” (Q 10:94)

A second major problem with the Muslim accusation of the corruption of the Bible is that it contradicts the story of the Bible told in many different ways by some of Islam’s most famous scholars during the early centuries of Islam in a variety of well-known Muslim sources.^{p.56}

Al-Biqā’ī often justified his reading the Torah from this verse in the Qur’an
“*Bring the Torah and read it if you are truthful!*” (Q 3:93)

When the fifteenth-century Egyptian scholar Al-Biqā’ī (d. 1480) was criticized for including material from the Bible in his Qur’an commentary, he appealed directly to the Qur’an itself and to a host of Muslim scholars of the past who freely used the Bible and even encouraged its use.^{p.6}

Al-Biqā’ī also reported the *ḥadīth* that the messenger encouraged his followers to narrate stories from the Jews. These traditions about the messenger of Islam led Al-Biqā’ī to argue that since it was the *sunna*¹ of the messenger of Islam to use the Bible, and since any practice of the messenger is legally binding on Muslims, there should be no doubt about the legality of quoting or using the Bible.^{p.7}

Most of the verses from the Qur’an used by Muslim polemicists past and present to support their accusation of corruption of the text of the Bible were not, in fact, understood by classical

¹ *Sunna* is the behaviour of the messenger of Islam as conceived by Muslims, based on *sīra* (his story) and *ḥadīth* (his traditional sayings), which along with the Qur’an is a major component in determining Islamic Law.

Muslim commentators on the Qur'an to mean textual corruption. Dr. Nickel's exploration of famous Muslim sources (*tafsīr, sīra, ḥadīth, asbāb al-nuzūl, and ta'rikh*), demonstrates that "the majority view among Muslims of the early centuries of Islam was that the earlier scriptures were intact in the seventh century."^{p.71} In fact, these sources offer "quotations" from the Torah and the Gospel and tell of the messenger of Islam showing respect to a copy of the Torah and even appealing to the Torah for legal rulings.

The Matter of the Messenger: Two Ambiguous Verses

A third issue of importance to explore is the actual claims of the two particular verses from the Qur'an that have been interpreted to mean accusations of falsification even in some commentaries. They are Q 2:79 and 3:78. "They deserve special attention" says Dr. Nickel because "accusations of falsification are often not examined for what they actually claim."^{p.73}

For example, notice three important things about Q 2:79. First it specifies no particular scripture. Second, the actors are not specified (simply "those"). Third, the action is not clearly focused.^{p.75} If the verse itself does not lead the reader to a clear accusation of falsification of the earlier scriptures, neither does the context in the Qur'an.

"So woe to those (*alladhīna*) who write the book (*kitāb*) with their hands, then say this is from Allah, in order to purchase a small gain with it. Woe to them for what their hands have written, and woe to them for what they earn." (Q 2:79)

"Surely (there is) indeed a group of them who twist their tongues with the Book, so that you will think it is from the Book, when it is not from the Book. And they say, 'It is from God,' when it is not from God. They speak lies against God, and they know (it)." (Q 3:78)

In regards to Q 3:78, the earliest Muslim commentators understood this to be a story of verbal change during the time of Moses. On the contrary, the Torah is portrayed as an intact, available source of authority (e.g. for the question of the punishment for adultery).²

The earliest complete Muslim commentary on the Qur'an in existence, that of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767), demonstrates how the earliest and greatest classical Muslim commentaries on the Qur'an understood these verses. According to Muqātil, the Jews of Medina erased (*maḥā*) the description (*na't*) of Islam's messenger from the Torah, and wrote "the alteration (*taghyīr*) of the description of Muhammad" in the Torah. A tradition passed on by al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), attributed to Abū 'l-Āliya, accuses the Jews of Medina of erasing both "the description of Muhammad" and "the name of Muhammad from the Torah."^{p.77} Muslim commentators who included accusations of falsification at Q 2:79 or 3:78 considered the *main object of change* to be the alleged description of the messenger of Islam. Similarly, they named the main location of change as the Torah, and the main falsifiers as the Jews of Medina. This is the specific and "by far the main accusation of falsification for more than a thousand years."

"The accusation that the Jews of Medina changed the description of the messenger of Islam in the Torah, emerges as by far the main accusation of falsification for more than a thousand years."^{p.81}

Accusations of more broad tampering among early Muslim commentators are rare but since these rare accusations were later spread and popularized by

² See pp. 40-43. Nickel explores this in detail in chapter three using exclusively Muslim sources, "many of them the best-known and most respected Muslim commentators in the first centuries of Islam." (p.38) The two commentators on the Qur'an featured are Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 923). Nickel points out that "In Islam, commentary is a traditional discipline. Rather than inventing new interpretations, commentators transmit and discuss interpretations inherited from the authorities of the past." (p.50)

a writing like the polemical *Izhār*, Nickel takes time to examine the source of this accusation.

Ibn Kathir’s interpretation of Q 2:79, described in al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 923) collected traditional interpretations of Islam, claimed that the People of the Book substituted (*baddala*) what Allah wrote and changed (*ghayyara*) the book with their hands and that such conduct when on from the period after Moses up to the time of Muhammad. Though this is a famous tradition it is important to observe what it actually says and does not say.

No evidence is offered for the accusation, and no particular object of falsification is identified. This single tradition of broad tampering contradicts what we know from the Qur’an, from the vast majority of stories told in Muslim commentaries, and from other early Islamic writings—including *Sahih al Bukhari* (d. 870). This single exception to the rule has led a number of scholars to suggest that al-Ṭabarī probably meant to say that the tamperers wrote “a separate book, alongside the Torah” and that “the *kitāb* in view might be the *Mishnah* or the *Talmud*.”³

So did the Jews of Medina tamper with the text of the Torah? Until relatively recently, the Muslim accusation of removing references to the messenger of Islam from the Bible could be made without fear of being tested by hard evidence. That is, no one was able to compare the biblical manuscripts from before the seventh century with the manuscripts from after the seventh century to see whether there was any evidence for the accusation. But in the past 150 years manuscripts of the Torah and Gospel dated to before the seventh century have been discovered and are now available for open study.^{p.89}

A detailed comparison of the *accusation* of biblical falsification and the actual *evidence* that can be used to evaluate the Muslim accusation in a scholarly way is available. In fact, Bible scholars take great freedom to indicate and describe any differences between existing manuscripts and make them readily accessible.⁴

If these manuscripts show no textual changes regarding the messenger of Islam, then “silence” can no longer be used to support the accusation. Rather, those bringing the accusation must give evidence of the Torah, or Torahs, from before the seventh century containing references to the messenger of Islam?^{p.90} To use a helpful expression from the Qur’an, “Produce your proof, if you speak truly” (Q 2:111).

So what does the scholarly evidence show?

Hebrew scholar Nahum M. Sarna stated that “*no further developments of any significance in the biblical Hebrew consonantal text took place during the 600 years that elapsed between the latest manuscripts from the tannaitic period (c. 200 C.E.) and the earliest medieval ones (c. ninth century C.E.)*.” Indeed, there are no scholarly articles of manuscript evidence to support the accusation that references to the messenger of Islam were altered or removed from the Torah.^{p.104} So we ask and invite our Muslim readers to be honest and reasonable. The accusation of biblical falsification is false and should end.

Al-Biqa’i was right that reading the Bible is fully in line with Islamic tradition.^{p.1} He and many others also bear witness that reading the Bible is a source of great blessings.^{p.18}

³ See *The Gentle Answer*, p. 85 for more details.

⁴ Ancient Greek manuscripts like the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus have now been posted online as have the Dead Sea Scrolls (in Hebrew) which date nearly eight centuries before the rise of Islam.