

The Qur'an and the early writings of Islam - what they say about the Bible

The accusation of the corruption or deliberate falsification of the Bible is popular among many Muslims. Muslim polemicists especially like to make this accusation.

But there are many problems with this accusation.

One of the main problems is that the Qur'an makes no such accusation! In fact, as many scholars have observed, both Muslim and non-Muslim, the Qur'an speaks of the earlier scriptures only in the most positive and respectful way.

The Qur'an contains much material related to earlier scriptures. Sometimes these scriptures are identified by name; other times they are identified by the prophet to whom they are believed to have been revealed. In still other cases, earlier scriptures seem to be indicated by terms that are less clear and therefore understood by Muslim interpreters in various ways.

“Allah sent down the Torah [Taurat of the Prophet Moses] and the Gospel [Injil of Jesus the Messiah] before this as guidance for the people.” (Q 3:3)

“We gave Moses the Book and the Deliverance, so that you might be rightly guided.” (Q 2:53)

In his new book *The Gentle Answer*, Dr. Gordon Nickel 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, his 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.”

The verses in which these scriptures are mentioned by name provide some of the following basic information about the qur'anic approach to them:

- Allah sends down the Torah (*Tawrat*) and the Gospel (*Injil*) (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)

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.

When the fifteenth-century Egyptian scholar Al-Biqā'i 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.

Al-Biqā'i also reported the *hadith* that the messenger encouraged his followers to narrate stories from the Jews. These traditions about the messenger of Islam led al-Biqā'i to argue that since it was the *sunna* 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.

Al-Biqā'i 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)

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 Muslim commentators on the Qur'an to mean textual corruption. Dr. Nickel's exploration of famous Muslim sources (*tafsir, sira, hadith, asbab al-nuzul, 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." 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.

"Neither the Qur'an itself, nor the first Muslim commentators on the Qur'an, nor the stories transmitted by other Muslim genres makes a clear and distinct accusation about the physical alteration of the earlier scriptures." (p. 71)

A third issue of importance to explore is the actual claims in the interpretations of two particular verses from the Qur'an that are most often quoted to back up accusations of biblical falsification. They are Q 2.79 and 3.78. Interpretations of these verses focus on alleged references to the messenger of Islam in the earlier scriptures, especially the Torah. "Most of the actions in the early centuries of Islam picture an action of physically changing a copy of the text of scripture, especially the Torah, and especially by the Jews of Medina in the early seventh century, in response to the appearance of Islam's messenger."

The earliest complete Muslim commentary on the Qur'an in existence, that of Muqatil ibn Sulayman (died 767 C.E.), demonstrates how the earliest and greatest classical Muslim commentaries on the Qur'an understood these verses. According to Muqatil, the Jews of Medina erased the description of Islam's messenger from the Torah, and wrote "the alteration of the description of Muhammad" in the Torah. A tradition passed on by al-Tabari (d. 923), attributed to Abu 'I-'Aliya, accuses the Jews of Medina of erasing both "the description of Muhammad" and "the name of Muhammad from the Torah." Muslim commentators who included accusations of falsification in their interpretations of 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.”

Accusations of more broad tampering are rare and contradict 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*.

“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}

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 many manuscripts of the Torah and Gospel dated to before the seventh century have been discovered and are now available for open study.

A detailed comparison of the *accusation* of biblical falsification and the actual *evidence* that can be used to evaluate the accusation in a scholarly way is now available. In fact, Bible scholars take great freedom to indicate and describe any differences between existing manuscripts and make them readily accessible.¹

If these manuscripts show no textual changes regarding the messenger of Islam, then an “argument from 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? 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 Bible 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 is no scholarly source that offers manuscript evidence to support the accusation that references to the messenger of Islam were altered or removed from the Torah. For this reason, we invite our Muslim friends to be honest and reasonable. The accusation of biblical falsification is false and should end.

Al-Biqā’i was right that reading the Bible is fully in line with Islamic tradition. He and many others also bear witness that reading the Bible is a source of great blessings.

¹ 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 years before the rise of Islam.