



EARLY MUSLIM ACCUSATIONS OF *TAHRĪF*:
MUQĀTIL IBN SULAYMĀN'S COMMENTARY
ON KEY QUR'ANIC VERSES

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There are many different ways to tamper. At least, this is the message of the earliest Muslim commentaries on the Qur'an. When these commentaries explained the verses which are most frequently used to support the Islamic doctrine of the corruption of previous scriptures, they portrayed a lively variety of actions by the People of the Book in response to the claims of Islam. Only rarely did these actions include falsification of the scriptures in their possession.

By contrast, later Muslim polemicists made the case that the tampering referred to in the Qur'an is mainly of one kind—the corruption or deliberate falsification of texts. This is also reflected in some of the Western scholarly treatments of the materials related to this theme in the Qur'an. And indeed, this is what is heard most often in Muslim-Christian conversation today.

Muslim polemicists and scholars of Islam alike commonly refer to a series of verses in the Qur'an when they discuss the doctrine of *tahrīf*. A total of 25 verses from the Qur'an are associated with the accusation. These may be called the 'tampering' verses because tampering is an elastic term which can include a wide variety of actions. As the evidence below will show, *tahrīf* for the early commentators did not mean what it came to mean.

An exploration of the exegesis of the tampering verses in the early commentaries offers hints about the development of the Islamic doctrine of corruption. The focus of early Muslim accusations of *tahrīf* was not corruption or falsification of the text. Rather, the commentators were more concerned about the response of non-Muslims—primarily the Jews of Madīna—to the Muslim claims that Muḥammad is a prophet and that the recitations he is speaking are from Allah.

The commentary of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān is particularly rich for this investigation. Muqātil died in 150/767 and his commentary on the Qur'an is the oldest complete edited commentary in good





condition.¹ It has only become widely available to scholars in the last few decades. Muqātil provides many interesting details in his exegesis of all of the tampering verses. The following description and analysis, however, will focus on what Muqātil understands to be the tampering action signified by the relevant verb.

Exegesis of the verses of alteration

Scholarly lists of tampering verses most frequently indicate four verses containing the verb *harrafa*. Muslim polemic is similar. Abdullah Saeed writes, ‘Of the terms related to “distortion” and “corruption” of the text used in the Qur’an, the popular Muslim view takes the derivatives of the term *tahrīf* as the basis of its insistence on the deliberate falsification of *Tawrāt* and *Injīl* by Jews and Christians, respectively.’² For this reason, the *harrafa* verses are examined in the greatest detail, along with three verses containing a second verb of alteration, *baddala*.

Adding words to a verbal report

‘Are you then so eager that they should believe you, seeing there is a party of them that heard the word of Allah, then tampered with (*yuharrifūna*) it, and that after they had understood it, knowingly?’ (*Baqara* 75)

Muqātil explains the meaning of this verse by telling a story about the children of Israel from the ancient past.³ He begins the story with his characteristic introduction, ‘This is about how...’ (*wa-dhālika an*). The seventy leaders whom Moses appointed ask to hear the voice of Allah. Allah requires them to purify themselves ritually, and they comply. They proceed with Moses to the mountain, then prostrate themselves when they hear the voice of Allah. Allah says,

¹ R. Forster, *Methoden mittelalterlicher arabischer Qur’anexegese am Beispiel von Q.53, 1-18*, Berlin, 2001, p. 11.

² ‘The charge of distortion of Jewish and Christian scriptures’, *The Muslim World* 92, 2002, [pp. 419-36] p. 420.

³ *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihāta, Beirut, 2002, vol. I, pp. 116-17.





‘I am your Lord, there is no god except me, the living, the eternal—I who brought you out of the land of Egypt by an exalted hand and powerful arm. Do not worship a god other than me, do not associate anything with me, and do not make an image of me. You will not see me, but you will hear my word (*kalāmī*).’⁴

However, hearing the voice of Allah causes all the seventy to fall unconscious from terror. When they regain consciousness, they beg Moses to receive Allah’s word on their behalf. Allah gives his commandments and prohibitions to Moses, and then Moses tells the seventy, who affirm, ‘We have heard our Lord and we obey.’ When the seventy return to the community, the people ask, ‘What did your Lord command you and prohibit you?’⁵

In answer to this question of the common people, writes Muqātil, some of the seventy report truthfully what they heard. Others of them report what they heard, but then add an extra clause at the end of Allah’s saying: ‘If you are not able to give up what he has forbidden you,’ they advise, ‘then just do what you are able.’⁶

Muqātil provides neither definition nor gloss of the verb *harrafa* at this its first appearance in the Qur’an. His understanding of the verb must therefore be seen in the narrative. Muqātil uses the object *kalām* repeatedly to refer to Allah’s verbal communication. There is no mention of the Torah or any other written text. The action of the group from among the seventy Jews which explains for Muqātil the meaning of *harrafa* must therefore be their adding to the verbal report of the commandments of Allah an extra alleviation clause.

Muqātil’s exegesis of the first *harrafa* verse here signals that the verb will have a more complex meaning in the commentary than simple falsification of text.

⁴ Ibid., p. 117.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. The *Sīra* narrative related to Q 2.75 is much shorter than that given by Muqātil, but similar in outline. The ending of that narrative, however, provides a significant variant: ‘Then [Moses] went back with them to the Children of Israel and when he came to them a party of them tampered with (*harrafa*) what they had been commanded; and when Moses said to the children of Israel, “Allah has ordered you to do so-and-so,” they...contradicted what Allah had said to them.’ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīrat al-nabī*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, Cairo, 1963), vol. II, p. 379.



*Insulting the Prophet*

Some of the Jews tamper with (*yuharrifūna*) words from their places saying, 'We have heard and we disobey' and 'Hear, may you not hear' and *rā'inā*, twisting with their tongues and defaming religion.... (*Nisā'* 46)

For his interpretation of this verse, Muqātil pictures a polemical situation between Muḥammad and the Jews of Madīna.⁷ The Jews 'tamper with the words out of their places.' This same phrase, *yuharrifūna al-kalima 'an mawāḍi'ihī*, appears at Q 5.13 and Q 5.41. In this first explanation of the phrase, Muqātil writes that the Jews do this action 'through tampering (*tahrīf*)'.⁸ The 'words', writes Muqātil, are the description of Muḥammad. He further explains 'out of their places' as 'out of its declaration (*bayān*) in the Torah'. And he finally qualifies the action in view as 'twisting with their tongues',⁹ a phrase which appears later in the verse. From these words he understands an action of disrespect toward Muḥammad and Islam.

When Muqātil explains the expressions of the Jews indicated in the verse, he seems to offer them as an illustration of what he means by the verb *harrafa*. By all indications—in the verse itself, in the exegete's brief glosses at Q 4.46, and in his exegesis of Q 2.104—these are speeches of resistance or attempts to insult. Muqātil's comment on 'twisting with their tongues and slandering religion' is that the Jews are denigrating the religion of Muḥammad in contrast to their own. He therefore understands the speeches to signify disrespect or insubordination to Muḥammad. In his explanation of Q 2.104, where *rā'inā* first appears, he understands this mysterious word to be a term of abuse among the Jews.¹⁰ The object of the verb 'twisting' in this scenario is not the Torah or the description of Muḥammad within it, but rather the religion of Muḥammad in the present encounter. When Muqātil uses the term *tahrīf* a second time, he joins it with 'slandering religion' in such a manner as to show that he under-

⁷ *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, vol. I, pp. 376-7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 128. Al-Farrā' (d. 207/822) also wrote that the Jews said *rā'inā* 'aiming it toward the abuse (*shatm*) of Muḥammad' (*Kitāb mā'ānī al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Yūsuf Najātī and Muḥammad 'Alī al-Najjār, Beirut, n.d., vol. I, p. 272).





stands the *tahrīf* of the Jews to be their twisting with their tongues.

It is the Jews' action of abuse toward the Prophet of Islam which Muqātil finds to be the tampering indicated by the verse. Muqātil gives no hint here of a concept of the corruption or falsification of the text of the Torah.

Refusing to acknowledge the truth

So for their breaking their covenant we cursed them and made their hearts hard, they tampering with (*yuharrifūna*) words from their places; and they have forgotten a portion of what they were reminded of....
(*Mā'ida* 13)

Muqātil's exegesis of this verse is dominated by the concept of covenant,¹¹ a key term which appears in the qur'anic verse immediately prior. Muqātil offers no new information about the verb *harrafa*. But he writes, as he did in his exegesis of Q 4.46, that 'the words (*kalim*) are the characteristic (*sifa*) of Muḥammad'. And immediately following this he offers a longer explanation of the tampering action he understands from the verse. On 'they have forgotten a portion of what they were reminded of', Muqātil writes:

This is about how Allah, powerful and exalted, made a covenant with Banū Isrā'īl in the Torah that they would believe in Muḥammad, may the prayers and peace of Allah be upon him, and give credence to him. He is written [in what is] with them in the Torah. Then when Allah, powerful and exalted, sent him, they disbelieved in him and envied him, and said, 'This one is not from the descendents of Ishāq, but rather he is from the descendents of Ismā'īl.'¹²

In this passage, the exegete introduces into the discussion of tampering two significant considerations. One is the claim that the command to respond appropriately to the Prophet of Islam is part of the covenant which Allah made with the children of Israel. The second is that the motivation of envy, awakened in the children of Israel when they saw that Muḥammad was not of their own kind, led them to reject him.

Muqātil presents the idea that the covenant which Allah made

¹¹ *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, vol. I, pp. 461-2.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 461.





with the people of Israel included a clause to anticipate and accept Muḥammad. An important feature of his exegesis is the phrase: 'He is recorded [in what is] with them (*indahum*) in the Torah.' The most natural conclusion to draw from Muqātil's use of this expression is that he envisions an intact text of the Torah in the possession of the Jews of Madīna. At issue for the exegete is not a previously corrupted or falsified text, but rather an inappropriate response to what is in the text. The narrative logic is that the description of Muḥammad is there in the Torah which they possess, but that when he appears they refuse to acknowledge it out of envy.

It is the Jews' action of deceit toward the Prophet of Islam in a contemporary response which Muqātil finds to be the tampering indicated by the verse. In the exegete's mind, the scriptures of the Jews contain a covenant in which the proper response to Muḥammad is specified. But the envy that has grown in the hearts of the Jews, born out of ethnic pride, has caused them to conceal and to neglect the truths written in the divine book they possess.

Setting aside a Torah command

...the Jews who listen to falsehood, listen to other folk, who have not come to you, tampering with (*yuharrifūna*) words from their places, saying, 'If you are given this, then take it; if you are not given it, beware!'.... (*Mā'ida* 41)

In Muqātil's exegesis of this verse, a long narrative about the Jews, Muḥammad and the 'verse of stoning' takes centre stage.¹³ Q 5.41 is one of the verses most frequently cited by Muslim and Western scholars alike in relation to the accusation of falsification.¹⁴

When Muqātil reaches the phrases about tampering, he gives their meaning by telling a story about particular Jews in Madīna during the rule of Muḥammad there. On behalf of the Jews of Khaybar, Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf and other Jewish leaders ask Muḥammad for a

¹³ Ibid., pp. 474-8.

¹⁴ Georges Vajda claimed that the stoning verse story was 'the most typical case for the illegitimate alteration of the Torah, upon which the Muslim tradition insists with the greatest complacency' ('Juifs et musulmans selon le ḥadīth', *Journal Asiatique* 229, 1937, [pp. 52-127] p. 92).





ruling on adultery. A pair of adulterers from Khaybar are set before the Prophet of Islam. The angel Gabriel gives Muḥammad the correct answer, then tells him to appoint a Torah scholar as mediator. Muḥammad therefore proceeds to the Jews' house of study to question their religious leaders. He singles out Ibn Ṣūriyā, adjures him to honesty, then asks him: 'Did you find in your book that stoning is the punishment for the one who commits adultery?'¹⁵ Ibn Ṣūriyā affirms that it is so, then adds that he would have concealed (*katama*) this had he not sworn to tell the truth. The Prophet of Islam exults in the confirmation of the words of Gabriel, exclaiming, 'Allah is greater! I am the first to revive one of the *sunnas* of Allah.'¹⁶ Muḥammad then pronounces the sentence for the two adulterers, and they are immediately stoned beside the door of his mosque.¹⁷

A number of elements in this story make it a prime generator of meaning and momentum, and influence the understanding of the tampering action. First of all, the dishonesty and deviousness of the Jews of Khaybar, and the connivance of the Jews of Madīna, are revealed to the reader right at the start. A test of prophethood is set up, the details of which Muḥammad does not know but to which the reader is privy. The conditions of successfully passing the test are provided beforehand, along with the possibility that Muḥammad may succeed—and indeed the Jews know that he may succeed. With the help of Gabriel, Muḥammad devises a clever stratagem for flushing out the Jewish scholar who knows the Torah best. He adjures Ibn Ṣūriyā, with insight into his Jewish religion, in such a way that he cannot but tell the truth. And the climax is striking: this young, bright scholar who knows the Torah best of all¹⁸ admits that he found the stoning penalty in that scripture; and then adds for good measure—while he is still feeling sworn to honesty and before he mysteriously disbelieves again—'By Allah, Muḥammad, the Jews do indeed know that you are a true prophet, but they envy you.'¹⁹ Muḥammad successfully passes the test of prophethood that was

¹⁵ *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, vol. I, p. 476.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

¹⁸ Literally, 'This is the most knowledgeable one in the Torah who remains' (*ibid.*, p. 476).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 477.





cynically placed before him, and his exultation at reviving ‘one of the *sunnas* of Allah’ becomes an epiphany of self-discovery.

The Prophet of Islam is here claiming a link with Allah’s revelations of the past. The attestation of his prophethood in this narrative is his ability to make a judgment that is contained in the Torah, and his authority is measured here against the accepted authority of an earlier scripture. The ‘proof’ of his authority is that the judgment he makes is written down in the Torah and—crucially—can be read from the Torah at that very time and place. To suggest at that point that the Torah in the hands of the Jews is corrupted would destroy the proof of authority which is being advanced.²⁰

Muqātil interprets the ‘words’ (*kalim*) with which the Jew are tampering as the commandment of stoning. He glosses ‘out of their places’ as ‘out of its declaration (*bayān*) in the Torah’. The exegete offers no further gloss or etymological information on the verb *harrafa*. Therefore its meaning must be gleaned from the narrative. The narrative shows that the tampering action which Muqātil understands from *harrafa* here is concealing or neglecting a judgment which can be found in an existing book—not an action of textual falsification.

Substituting one saying for another

And when we said, ‘Enter this township, and eat easefully of it wherever you will, and enter in at the gate, prostrating, and say, *ḥiṭṭatun*. We will forgive you your transgressions, and increase the good-doers.’ Then the evildoers substituted (*baddala*) a saying other than that which had been said to them.... (*Baqara* 58-9)

Q 2.59 comes in the middle of a long section of scriptural narrative

²⁰ This conclusion is supported by the fact that during the first centuries of Islam, the stoning verse story was connected with various other verses in the Qur’an. For example, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 211/827) narrates the story to explain Q 5.44 (‘Surely we sent down the Torah, wherein is guidance and light; thereby the prophets who had surrendered themselves gave judgment’). ‘Abd al-Razzāq concludes his exegesis of this verse by claiming that the stoning verse story shows Muḥammad to be one of the ‘surrendered prophets’ who gave judgment according to the Torah (*Tafsīr al-Qur’an al-‘azīz*, Beirut, 1991, vol. I, p. 185). In his *kitāb al-tafsīr*, al-Bukhārī tells the story around the words spoken by Muḥammad: ‘Bring you the Torah now and recite it, if you are truthful’ (Q 3.93) (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Cairo, 1955, vol. V, p. 170, *bāb* 58).





about the children of Israel (Q 2.49-74). Muqātil explains this verse by telling a story about Banū Isrāʾīl from the distant past, when that community was led by Yūshuʿa ibn Nūn.²¹ The verb of alteration in Q 2.59 is *baddala*, to change or substitute. The action of tampering which Muqātil understands here is a verbal substitution or replacement of one expression with another.

When Banū Isrāʾīl were about to enter through the gate of a town called ʾIlyāʾ, recounts Muqātil, Allah commanded them to say the expression *hiṭṭatun* at the moment of entering. In the event, the good-doers voiced the expression which they had been commanded to say. Others, however, said *ʾhaṭā saqamāthā*, which Muqātil interprets to mean *ʾred wheat (ḥinṭa hamrāʾ)*. The exegete also explains the way in which this was said: *ʾThey said that mocking (istihzāʾ) and altering (tabdīl) what they had been commanded.*²²

Along with the verbal alteration of an expression came a substitution of posture as well. Allah had commanded Banū Isrāʾīl to enter the town prostrate, which Muqātil pictures as *ʾbending upon one side of their faces*.²³ The disobedient people, however, enter the gate lying down.

A variant of this verse appears in Q 7.182. Muqātil treats this verse only briefly.²⁴ There is some variation in the details of his interpretation. However, as at Q 2.59, he understands the verse to refer to the verbal replacement of one expression with another, and the substitution of one posture for another. There is no suggestion in these passages of the falsification or corruption of a text of scripture.²⁵

²¹ *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, vol. I, pp. 109-10.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 69.

²⁵ A third occurrence of *baddala* comes at Q 2.211; *ʾAsk the Children of Israel how many a clear sign we gave them. Whoso changes (yubaddil) Allahʾs blessing after it has come to him, Allah is terrible in retribution.* Muqātil understands this verse to mean that the Jews of Madīna did not respond to Allah in a way that was appropriate to the many signs given to their forefathers. *ʾThey disbelieved (kaḥāra) in the Lord of these blessings when they disbelieved in Muḥammad* (*ibid.*, vol. I, p. 180).



*Conclusion on the verses of alteration*

Muqātil reveals his understanding of *tahrīf* and *tabdīl* in these verses largely through the narratives he offers, and he clearly does not understand the qur'anic occurrences of *ḥarrafā* and *baddala* to mean corruption or falsification of text. As we have seen, the narratives portray a variety of actions which do not include falsification of text. It seems that for Muqātil, *tahrīf* and *tabdīl* were elastic terms comparable to the English 'tampering'. It should also be noted that Muqātil's approach is outside the common characterization of the accusation of *tahrīf* as either *tahrīf al-ma'nā* or *tahrīf al-naṣṣ* (change of interpretation or change of text).

Exegesis of other tampering verbs

Casting the net out wider into the semantic field of tampering covers several other verses which have been associated with the doctrine of corruption. The theme of inappropriate response to the Prophet of Islam dominates Muqātil's exegesis of verses containing the verbs *labbasa* (to confuse),²⁶ *lawā* (to twist)²⁷ and *nasiya* (to forget).²⁸

Muqātil understands verses containing *labbasa* to refer to actions by Jewish leaders to confuse the Jewish community by concealing information about Muḥammad in the Torah and by giving mixed messages about how to respond to the Prophet of Islam. He interprets the *nasiya* verses to mean choices by the People of the Book to disbelieve in Muḥammad in spite of the clear commandments in their scriptures to believe in him and follow him. Twisting words with their tongues (Q 4.46) or twisting their tongues (Q 3.78) would seem to be a verbal action. Indeed, at Q 4.46 Muqātil understands it this way. However, his exegesis of Q 3.78 indicates a quite different action of tampering.²⁹

²⁶ Q 2.42, 3.71.

²⁷ Q 3.78, 4.46.

²⁸ Q 2.44, 5.13, 5.14.

²⁹ *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, vol. I, p. 286.



*Erasing the description of Muḥammad*

And there is a sect of them twist (*yalawna*) their tongues with the book, that you may suppose it part of the book, yet it is not part of the book; and they say, 'It is from Allah,' yet it is not from Allah, and they speak falsehood against Allah, and that wittingly. (*Āl 'Imrān* 78)

In his exegesis of the second part of Q 3.78, Muqātil writes that the locus of tampering is the Torah itself. On 'it is not part of the book' Muqātil writes that the Jews wrote something other than the description (*na't*) of Muḥammad, 'and they erased (*maḥā*) his description'.³⁰

At Q 4.46, Muqātil understands the verb *lawā* to mean a verbal action of Jews in inappropriate response to the Prophet of Islam. This leads to the conclusion that Muqātil's statement of textual falsification at Q 3.78 is triggered not by *lawā* but rather by the scriptural clause, 'that you may suppose it part of the book, yet it is not part of the book; and they say, "it is from Allah," yet it is not from Allah.' This clause bears a resemblance to the wording of Q 2.79, about which the exegete makes a similar accusation of textual falsification (described below).

Exegesis of the concealment verses

The verb which occurs most frequently in the Qur'an's semantic field of tampering is *katama*, to conceal.³¹ Together with the occurrences of the similar verbs *asarra*³² and *akhfā*,³³ they lead us to eleven interesting passages in Muqātil's commentary.

The eleven concealment verses are all understood in a similar way by Muqātil. In each case, he identifies the locus of the tampering action as the Torah. The actors are consistently Jews in Arabia at the time of Muḥammad. The object of tampering in all but one passage is information about the Prophet of Islam. The exegete claims in his comments on Q 2.146 that the focus of concealment is rather

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Q 2.42, 2.140, 2.146, 2.159, 2.174, 3.71, 3.187, 4.37.

³² Q 2.77.

³³ Q 5.15, 6.91.





the information about the *qibla* in the Torah.³⁴ At Q 5.15 and Q 6.91 he adds the matter of stoning to the matter of Muḥammad,³⁵ and at Q 2.159 he indicates these two objects plus commandments of what is permitted and forbidden.³⁶

Muqātil writes that the Jews are concealing this information. The motivation for this concealing, he writes at Q 3.73, is envy and ethnic pride.³⁷ The exegete thus understands concealing to be an action of inappropriate and ill-conceived response to the truth in the Jewish scripture about the Prophet of Islam.

The frequency of concealment verbs in suras 2-7, and as a consequence the frequency of concealment explanations in the commentary, produces a cumulative effect. The accusation of concealing logically assumes an intact text of scripture, and Muqātil's exegesis of the concealment verses therefore paints a backdrop against which verses of alteration must be interpreted.

Writing false information

A circle even beyond the semantic field of tampering circumscribes verses which contain expressions of action: 'selling for a small price',³⁸ 'throwing behind backs',³⁹ and 'writing with hands'.⁴⁰ Muqātil understands these expressions to indicate a variety of tampering actions other than falsification of text. But there is one notable exception to this pattern:

So woe to those who write the book with their hands, then say, 'This is from Allah,' that they may sell it for a little price; so woe to them for what their hands have written, and woe to them for their earnings. (*Baqara* 79)

Muqātil understands this verse to mean an action by Jewish leaders in Madīna to alter the text of the Torah.⁴¹ He explains that 'those

³⁴ *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, vol. I, pp. 147-8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 463, 575.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

³⁸ Q 2.41, 2.79, 2.174, 3.77, 3.187, 3.199, 5.44, 9.9, 16.95.

³⁹ Q 2.101, 3.187.

⁴⁰ Q 2.79.

⁴¹ *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, vol. I, p. 118.





who write the *kitāb* with their hands' refers to writing something other than the description (*na't*) of Muḥammad. He writes: 'This is about how the chiefs of the Jews of Madīna erased (*maḥā*) the description of Muḥammad (may God bless him and give him peace) from the Torah, and wrote other than his description, and told the Jews something other than the description of Muḥammad.'⁴² In explaining a later part of the verse, 'what their hands have written', Muqātil adds: 'meaning in the Torah of the alteration (*taghyīr*) of the description of Muḥammad'.⁴³ Muqātil therefore understands the expression 'write the book with hands' at Q 2.79 to mean an action by Jewish leaders in Madīna to insert false information into the Torah in their possession.

The accusation here and at Q 3.78 is not of corruption of the text of the Torah by neglect or deliberate falsification prior to Islam. Muqātil understands that an intact Torah is in the hands of the Jews when they meet the Prophet of Islam in Madīna. They alter the text of the Torah as a response to claims of Muḥammad's prophethood.



Falsification of text in context



Muqātil's accusations of falsification at Q 2.79 and Q 3.78 suggest that this tradition was already in circulation in the middle of the second Islamic century. At the same time, these accusations raise questions about the consistency of Muqātil's treatment of the tampering theme. Among explanations of twenty-five tampering verses, he makes the accusation of textual alteration in only two passages. Most of the remaining explanations seem to assume an intact Torah. The accusations of alteration must therefore be described as 'punctiliar'. They show no continuity with their contexts in the commentary. They also do not fit into the series of Muqātil's explanations of other tampering verses.

What could account for the presence of accusations of falsification in Muqātil? What could explain their isolation? The presence of the accusations seems to be related to the phrase 'those who write the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.





kitāb with their hands' in Q 2.79. This wording may in turn relate to a tradition in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī:

...How can you question the People of the Book, when your book which he has sent down to his Prophet (may God bless him and give him peace) is the more recent news from Allah and you recite it undistorted (*yushab*); and when Allah has told you that the People of the Book changed (*baddala*) what Allah wrote, and altered (*ghayyara*) the book with their hands, then said, 'It is from Allah,' that they may sell it for a little price?...⁴⁴

The phrases 'with their hands' and 'from Allah, that they may sell it for a little price' are identical in scripture and tradition. Could similarities of wording have led Muqātil to recount the tradition in his exegesis of Q 2.79 and Q 3.78?

As for the isolated nature of the falsification accusations, a clue may be found in Muqātil's exegetical method. Muqātil explains the meanings of the qur'anic verses with story.⁴⁵ And looming over his entire commentary is a narrative framework which gives cohesion to the diverse materials of the Qur'an.⁴⁶ What then is the story which Muqātil wants to tell?

Extensive research in the contexts of Muqātil's tampering passages reveals a story about attestation to Muḥammad in the earlier scriptures, and the obstinacy of the Jews of Madīna to accept the claims of Muḥammad's authority. Does the suggestion of textual corruption or falsification fit into this narrative? If the goal is to prove that Muḥammad confirms what is in the Torah and to show the Jews culpable for their rejection of him, is it better for the text of the Torah to be intact—or already corrupted? Can the dominant narrative have an influence on the way in which the verses of tampering are interpreted?

This concept of narrative influence can be tested in the *Sīra*. Ibn Ishāq (d. 151/768), a contemporary of Muqātil, offers a great deal of material connecting the appearance of the Prophet of Islam with the prophecies of his coming in the Torah and Gospel. An extended section about Muḥammad and the Jews of Madīna gives a narrative

⁴⁴ *Kitāb al-shahādāt*, bāb 31, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. III, p. 163.

⁴⁵ J. Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford, 1977, pp. 127f.

⁴⁶ K. Versteegh, 'Grammar and exegesis: the origins of Kufan grammar and the *Tafsīr Muqātil*', *Der Islam* 67, 1990, [pp. 206-42] p. 210.





framework for *Sūrat al-Baqara* as well as for many other passages in suras 3-5.⁴⁷ In this section eleven of the tampering verses are touched on. The consistent message of this entire section is that the Jews have in their hands scriptures which contain references to Muḥammad, yet they obstinately refuse to respond appropriately.

Ibn Ishāq's understanding of the alteration verses is substantially the same as that of Muqātil. When Ibn Ishāq recounts the story of the stoning verse, however, he adds a revealing anecdote.⁴⁸ In order to make his judgment, the Prophet of Islam calls for a Torah to be brought out. But a rabbi cleverly conceals the stoning verse with his hand. When 'Abd Allāh Ibn Salām knocks the rabbi's hand from off the verse, Muḥammad declares, 'Woe to you Jews! What has induced you to abandon the judgment of Allah which you hold in your hands?'⁴⁹

A striking fact about the narratives Ibn Ishāq offers in the *Sīra* is the absence of any accusation of the textual falsification of the previous scriptures. He offers no comments on Q 2.79 or Q 3.78. Why did the author of the *Sīra* not use these verses in his narrative? If he had heard the accusation of falsification, why did he not include it in his characterization of the Jews of Madīna? There is little doubt that in this salvation history the Jews emerge as a deceitful, obstinate, indeed treacherous people. Did Ibn Ishāq not consider the accusation of their falsification of the text of the Torah helpful for his portrayal? Was he possibly not familiar with the accusation?

The mystery of Muqātil's accusations of falsification continues in the *hadīth*. The tradition from al-Bukhārī cited above seems to be the only tradition in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* about alteration of the Torah. At the same time, al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* contains many traditions which tell of interactions between the Jews and Muḥammad in the narrative style of Muqātil's commentary and the *Sīra*. These other traditions seem to assume an intact Torah in the hands of the Jews. Two examples are the version of the stoning verse story associated with Q 3.93 ('Bring here the Torah and recite it if you are truthful'),⁵⁰ and the tradition that, 'The People of the Book used to read the

⁴⁷ *Sīrat al-Nabī*, vol. II, pp. 372-412.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 406.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Kitāb tafsīr al-Qur'an*, bāb 58, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. V, p. 170.





Torah in Hebrew and give its interpretation (*fassara*) in Arabic for the people of Islam.⁵¹

Many other examples of the magnetic appeal of narrative could be given from *sīra*, *ḥadīth* and early *tafsīr*. Even the classical commentators seemed to prefer narrative to theological dogma.⁵² If the reigning narrative of Jewish obstinacy exerted an influence on Muqātil's interpretation of the tampering verses, it would help to account for the isolated nature of his accusations of falsification.

Conclusion

It is clear from the analysis of Muqātil's exegesis of the tampering verses that he did not understand the verbs *ḥarrafa* and *baddala* to refer to an act of textual falsification of the earlier scriptures. Rather, he explains the verses containing these verbs with a variety of tampering actions which revolve around response to authority. He recounts stories of verbal alteration of divine commands from the history of the children of Israel. He also tells stories of inappropriate Jewish response to the Prophet of Islam.

Muqātil understands Q 2.79 to refer to a Jewish act of falsification of the text of the Torah. This understanding seems to carry over into his exegesis of Q 3.78. The trigger for this interpretation seems to be the phrase, 'write the book with their hands' (Q 2.79). Muqātil places the action in Madīna at the time of Muḥammad's rule as part of an inappropriate Jewish response to his appearance.

Muqātil's interpretations of the remaining twenty-three verses of tampering portray a lively variety of actions. He mostly tells how the people of the book conceal the contents of the scriptures which are with them. He recounts verbal demonstrations of disrespect toward the Prophet of Islam, rejection of his authority, and refusals to follow

⁵¹ *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, bāb 51, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. VIII, p. 213.

⁵² Wansbrough wrote concerning the popularity of 'haggadic' expression, 'The substance of Bukhārī, Muslim and Tirmidhī is that of Muqātil, Ibn Ishāq, Sufyān, and Kalbī. It is also that of the entire exegetical tradition, excluding the masoretic literature, up to and including Suyūṭī' (*Quranic Studies*, p. 183). Norman Calder documented the appeal of narrative in his study of major commentators, 'Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Abraham', in G.R. Hawting and A.-K.A. Shareef, eds, *Approaches to the Qur'an*, London, 1993, [pp. 101-40] pp. 108, 118-21.





and obey him according to the stipulations of the covenant. The Jews take the law of Allah so lightly that they set aside important commandments just because they lack the will to apply them. The intact text of the Torah remains solidly in the background of all of these actions of tampering.



