

Distortion and Divine Revelation¹

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Most modern Muslim scholars and the general public believe that the Bible is a mixture of truths and falsehoods, composed over successive historical periods², and that it has undergone distortion of interpretation and of the text itself.

In this article, I will specifically examine the issue of *tahrīf* (distortion), beginning with its appearance in several verses of the Generous Qur'an, followed by observations of how early, medieval, and contemporary Muslim exegetes (commentators) understood those verses, and concluding with how the idea of "distortion" appeared in various Islamic polemical and dialogical writings—particularly up to the 14th century CE.

This article aims to encourage members of both the Christian and Islamic faiths to engage in dialogue about the understanding and interpretation of the Bible, in order to remove barriers and misunderstandings between them, overcome religious fanaticism, and contribute to establishing interfaith dialogue on foundations that bring people closer together and elevate them spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally through constructive exchange.

"Distortion" (*tahrīf*) according to Qur'anic commentators

The verb *harrafa* (to distort or alter), which denotes the distortion of scriptures, appears four times in the Qur'an. I will first cite these verses, then examine how the most prominent ancient and contemporary commentators have interpreted them.

First verse:

"أَفَتَطْمَعُونَ أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا لَكُمْ وَقَدْ كَانَ فَرِيقٌ مِّنْهُمْ يَسْمَعُونَ كَلِمَ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ يُحَرِّفُونَهُ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا عَقَلُوهُ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ"

"Do you then expect them to believe in you, while a group of them used to hear the word of God, then distort it after they had understood it, while they knew?"

Surah Al-Baqarah 2:75

¹ This article is an excerpt from *Good News of a Word from Him: An Examination of the Messiah in the Generous Qur'an* by Sheikh Ayoub Al-Saber and Timothy Michael Paulson, privately published, 2026.

² Ajak, Bassam Daoud, *The Islamic-Christian Dialogue: Principles - History - Themes - Objectives*, Dar Qutaiba, 1998, p. 338 (Place of publication unknown)

Commentators interpret *ḥarrafa* here as changing the word from its true meaning—that is, deliberately misinterpreting it after correctly understanding it.³ Most agree that this verse refers to a group among the Jews.⁴

Some commentators mention two historical incidents in which Jews engaged in such distortion of meaning:

- When Israelite leaders heard the word of Allah from Prophet Musa(p) at Mount Sinai. Upon returning, some of them distorted it by saying that Allah told Musa(p): “Obey My commandments as much as you can, but you may abandon them when they are difficult.”⁵ The distortion, therefore, was not in the actual words of Allah, but in what some Jews later added as if it had been Allah’s own speech, even though they had understood the words given to Musa(p).⁶
- It is claimed that some Jews at the time of Muhammad(p) heard Allah’s word—i.e., the Tawrat—concerning the description of the Prophet (in the Tawrat), and distorted its meaning. In this way, they were following the path of their ancestors who had distorted the words of the Tawrat.⁷

Thus, in both cases, a group of Jews misled others by misinterpreting and misapplying what they had correctly understood. The phrase “*after understanding it*” shows that this was done deliberately, not in ignorance.⁸ None of the Qur’anic commentators up to Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456 AH) understood *tahrif* here as a *literal alteration* of the words of Allah (تحريف النص or *tahrif al-nass*), but rather as misleading interpretation, misuse of context, or “adding” to Allah’s words.

Second verse:

"مِنَ الَّذِينَ هَادُوا يُحَرِّفُونَ الْكَلِمَ عَنْ مَوَاضِعِهِ وَيَقُولُونَ سَمِعْنَا وَعَصَيْنَا وَأَسْمَعُ غَيْرَ مُسْمِعٍ وَرَعْنَا لَيْئًا بِأَلْسِنَتِهِمْ وَطُعْنًا فِي الدِّينِ وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا وَأَسْمَعُ وَأَنْظُرْنَا لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُمْ وَأَقْوَمَ وَلَكِنْ لَعَنَهُمُ اللَّهُ بِكُفْرِهِمْ فَلَا يُؤْمِنُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا"

“Among the Jews are some who distort words from their [proper] places and say, ‘We have heard and disobeyed,’ and ‘Hear, [O Muhammad], may you not be made to hear,’ and ‘Observe us,’ twisting their tongues and defaming the religion. And if they had said, ‘We

³ See Al-Tabarsi, Abu Ali Al-Fadl ibn Al-Hasan, *Majma' Al-Bayan fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an*, Dar Maktabat Al-Hayat, new and corrected edition, Beirut, Lebanon, Part One, pp. 316-318; see also Al-Tabari, *Jami' Al-Bayan fi Ta'wil Al-Qur'an* 1332-1328, edited by Ahmad and Mahmud Shakir, Al-Risalah Foundation, 1420 AH / 2000 CE, Vol. 2, pp. 245-256, Al-Akhbar

⁴ Al-Tusi, Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Al-Hasan, *Al-Tibyan fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an*, edited and corrected by Ahmad Habib Qasir Al-Amili, Dar Ihya' Al-Turath Al-Arabi, first edition, Beirut, Lebanon, Vol. One, pp. 312-314

⁵ Shirazi, Nasir Makarim *al-Amthal fi Tafsir Kitab Allah al-Munzal*, Al-Ba'tha Foundation for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, First Edition, Beirut, Lebanon, 1992, Volume 1, pp. 238-240.

⁶ Al-Katani, Sayyid Hashim ibn Sayyid Sulayman ibn Sayyid Isma'il ibn Sayyid 'Abd al-Jawad al-Husayni al-Bahrani al-Tubli, *Al-Burhan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Tehran, printed at Jabkhaneh Aftab, Volume 1, p. 115)

⁷ Mughniyya Muhammad Jawad, *Al-Tafsir Al-Kashif*, Dar Al-Jawad, Third Edition, Beirut, Lebanon, 1981 AD, Part One, pp. 131-132

⁸ Al-Burusawi, Ismail Haqqi, (may God have mercy on him), *Tafsir Ruh Al-Bayan*, Dar Ihya' Al-Turath Al-Arabi, Seventh Edition, Beirut, Lebanon, 1985 AD, Volume One, pp. 166-167.

have heard and obeyed,' and 'Hear,' and 'Look at us,' it would have been better for them and more upright. But Allah has cursed them for their disbelief, so they do not believe except for a few." Surah Al-Nisa' 4:46

Commentators agree this verse refers to Jews who mocked and defied the Prophet Muhammad. They distorted words "from their proper meanings," i.e., purposefully misinterpreted expressions of the Torah.⁹ Some 20th-century commentators noted that such distortion is not limited to those Jews—rather, "in our time, there are those who professionally practice the religion of Muslims who rival the Jews in this trait."¹⁰

The main meaning here is distortion of *interpretation* or *meaning*, not of the written text—though a few, like al-Māturīdī (d. 333 AH), said that verbal alteration is also possible.

Third verse:

"فَبِمَا نَقَضْتُمْ مِيثَاقَهُمْ لَعَنَّاهُمْ وَجَعَلْنَا قُلُوبَهُمْ قَلْسِيَةً يَحْرِفُونَ الْكَلِمَ عَنْ مَوَاضِعِهِ وَنَسُوا حَظًّا مِمَّا ذُكِّرُوا بِهِ وَلَا تَزَالُ تَطَّلِعُ عَلَى خَائِنَةٍ مِنْهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِنْهُمْ فَأَعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاصْفَحْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ"

"So for their breaking of the covenant We cursed them and made their hearts hard. They distort words from their [proper] places and have forgotten a portion of that of which they were reminded. And you will still observe treachery from them, except for a few of them. So pardon them and overlook [their faults]. Indeed, Allah loves the doers of good."

Surah Al-Mai'dah 5:13

Many exegetes connect "distortion" here with the hardening of the Jews' hearts,¹¹ which was the result of breaking their covenant; as the text says "We cursed them," which accounts for their banishment from the land.¹² The phrase "they forgot a portion" suggests that their disobedience caused them to neglect and forget parts of the Torah, resulting in "distortion."¹³

Thus, *tahṛīf* here means *neglect* and *concealment*, not *textual change*. Some, however, understood it as the concealment of Muhammad's(p) description in their scriptures—meaning possible alteration, which is close to verbal/textual alteration.¹⁴

⁹ Qutb, Sayyid, *Fi Zilal Al-Qur'an, Dar Al-Shuruq*, Seventh Sharia Edition, Cairo, Egypt, 1978 AD, Volume Five, pp. 675-676; What is stated in Jami' al-Tabari strongly indicates that the issue of distortion pertains to meanings, not words. Al-Tabari says: "As for the interpretation of His saying: 'They distort the words from their proper places,' it means: they distort their meaning and change them from their interpretation." See al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, vol. 4, p. 436. Also see al-Qurtubi, Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Ansari, *al-Jami' li-Ahkam al-Qur'an, Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi*, Beirut, Lebanon, 1965, vol. 5, pp. 242-244. Also see the committee of scholars under the supervision of the Islamic Research Academy at al-Azhar, *al-Tafsir al-Wasit lil-Qur'an al-Karim*, General Authority for Amiri Printing Affairs, first edition, Cairo, Egypt, 1973, 1994 edition, Part 5, pp. 822-823.)

¹⁰ Qutb, Sayyid. *ibid*

¹¹ Al-Alusi, Abu Al-Fadl Shihab Al-Din Al-Sayyid Mahmud, *Ruh Al-Ma'ani fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Azim wa Al-Sab' Al-Mathani, Dar Ihya' Al-Turath Al-'Arabi*, Fourth Edition, Beirut, Lebanon, 1985 AD, Part Six, pp. 89-90.

¹² Al-Zamakhshari, Jad Allah Mahmud ibn Umar, *Al-Kashshaf 'an Haqa'iq Ghawamid al-Tanzil wa 'Uyun al-Aqawil fi Wujuh al-Ta'wil*, Part One, pp. 614-616; and Al-Shirazi, Nasir Makarim, *Al-Amthal fi Tafsir Kitab Allah al-Munzal*, Al-Ba'tha Foundation for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, First Edition, Beirut, Lebanon, 1992, Volume Three, pp. 569-572.

¹³ Al-Fayd al-Kashani, Mawla Muhsin, *Tafsir al-Safi, Manshurat Mu'assasat al-A'lam lil-Matbu'at*, second edition, Beirut, Lebanon, 1982, part two, p. 21

¹⁴ *The Holy Quran with Jalalayn Commentary in the margins*, Dar Ihya Ulum al-Din, Damascus, Syria, p. 144

Fourth verse:

"يَا أَيُّهَا الرُّسُولُ لَا يَحْزَنْكَ الَّذِينَ يُسَارِعُونَ فِي الْكُفْرِ مِنَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا آمَنَّا بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَلَمْ تُؤْمِنْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَمِنَ الَّذِينَ هَادُوا سَمَّاعُونَ لِلْكَذِبِ سَمَّاعُونَ لِقَوْمٍ آخَرِينَ لَمْ يَأْتُوكَ يُحَرِّفُونَ الْكَلِمَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَوَاضِعِهِ يَقُولُونَ إِنْ أُوتِيتُمْ هَذَا فَخُذُوهُ وَإِنْ لَمْ تُؤْتَوْهُ فَاحْذَرُوا وَمَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ فِتْنَتَهُ فَلَنْ تَمْلِكَ لَهُ مِنْ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ أَنْ يُطَهِّرْ قُلُوبَهُمْ لَهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا خِزْيٌ وَلَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ"

"Messenger, do not be sad about those who hasten to disbelief, whether among those who said with their mouths, 'We have believed,' when their hearts have not believed, or among the Jews, who listen to lies, hearken to other people who have not come to you, and distort the sense of words out of their context. They say, 'If you have been given this, take it, and if you have not been given it, beware.' If Allah wants to tempt someone, you will not be able to do anything for him against Allah. Those whose hearts Allah does not want to purify will have shame in this world and great torment in the hereafter." Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:41

This verse refers to an incident where some Jews asked Muhammad(p) to judge between them in a legal dispute. According to one account, the Jews sent a message to Muhammad(p) asking him to decide on a matter of blood money between two of their tribes.¹⁵

In another account, they asked the Prophet of Islam(p) about a case of adultery. They told their followers to accept his ruling only if it matched their traditions, not the Tawrat's actual ruling. Thus, their "distortion" was in manipulating the *application* of the law—specifically, the punishment for adultery (stoning),¹⁶ which they had replaced with flogging.

When the Prophet of Islam(p) returned them to their own law, they rejected his ruling due to the hardness of their hearts; this resulted in a contradiction, or "covering" of their Scriptures. The Qur'an's accusation, therefore, concerns their distortion of *misrepresentation* or *implementation*, not a changing of the Torah's text.

Two other verses related to the issue of distortion are worth mentioning.

First related verse:

"قَوْلٍ لِّلَّذِينَ يَكْنُبُونَ الْكِتَابَ بِأَيْدِيهِمْ ثُمَّ يَقُولُونَ هَٰذَا مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ لِيُشْتَرَوْا بِهِ تَمَتًّا قَلِيلًا قَوْلٍ لَّهُمْ مِمَّا كُتِبَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَوَيْلٌ لَّهُمْ مِمَّا يَكْسِبُونَ"

¹⁵ This is also found in Al-Alusi, Abu al-Fadl Shihab al-Din al-Sayyid Mahmud, *Ruh al-Ma'ani fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim wa al-Sab' al-Mathani, Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi*, fourth edition, Beirut, Lebanon, 1985, part six, pp. 135-140. See also Al-Fayd al-Kashani, Mawla Muhsin, *Tafsir al-Safi*, Al-A'lami Foundation Publications, second edition, Beirut, Lebanon, 1982, part two, pp. 35-37.

¹⁶ *The Holy Quran with Jalalayn Commentary in the margins*, Dar Ihya Ulum al-Din, Damascus, Syria, pp. 149-150

“Woe to those who write the Scripture with their own hands, then say, ‘This is from God,’ in order to exchange it for a small price. Woe to them for what their hands have written and woe to them for what they earn.” Surah Al-Baqarah 2:79

In this verse, exegetes saw the clearest example of verbal distortion of the Tawrat, linking it to Jews who wrote false descriptions of the Prophet and presented it as if it were their Scriptures.¹⁷ Yet, they did not accuse the Jews of altering the entire Tawrat—only of fabricating certain writings and falsely attributing them to Allah for worldly gain.

Second related verse:

“وَإِنَّ مِنْهُمْ لَفَرِيقًا يَلُؤْنَ أَلْسِنَتَهُم بِالْكِتَابِ لِتَحْسَبُوهُ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَمَا هُوَ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَيَقُولُونَ هُوَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ وَمَا هُوَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ وَيَقُولُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ”

“And indeed, there is among them a group who distort the Scripture with their tongues so that you may think it is from the Scripture, but it is not from the Scripture. And they say, ‘It is from God,’ but it is not from God. And they speak untruth about God while they know.”

Surah Aal Imran 3:78

Some commentators have said that this “twisting” refers to some who distorted the word by “[deviating] from its intended meaning.” Some exegetes add that this verse was “revealed concerning both Jews and Christians” who create false religious doctrines from their misrepresentation of their books.¹⁸

Yet others extended the verse’s meaning to include corrupt religious leaders of all faiths who, “when they become corrupt... interpret the texts of their book and twist them to arrive at certain conclusions, which they claim are the meaning of these texts... while these conclusions fundamentally contradict the truth of Allah’s religion.”¹⁹

More contemporary commentators similarly suggest that some Jews wrote “another book” and “distorted its meaning by reciting it in a way that misled people into believing it was from the Tawrat.” This resulted in traditions that excluded non-Jews from participating in the worship of Allah. Some note that “their Muslim counterparts are doing the same today” by adding to the plain Scriptures.²⁰

In summary, the verse describes how both Jews and others fabricate speeches and invent beliefs, while attributing them to Allah and the Book. This does not constitute a distortion of the Tawrat text itself. Rather, it consists of rhetorical and verbal additions from outside the

¹⁷ Al-Tusi, Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn al-Hasan, *Al-Tibyan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an*, previous reference, vol. 1, pp. 321-323. Al-Tabarsi, Abu Ali al-Fadl ibn al-Hasan, *Majma’ al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an*, previous reference, vol. 1, pp. 325-328; Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-‘Azim*, vol. 2, p. 323.

¹⁸ A committee of scholars under the supervision of the Islamic Research Academy at Al-Azhar, *The Intermediate Interpretation of the Holy Qur’an*, previous reference, Part Three, pp. 603-604.

¹⁹ Qutb, Sayyid, *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, previous reference, Volume One, pp. 418-419.

²⁰ In this book, see page 164, footnote 101 for an example of this.

Tawrat, which some of these people attributed to Allah in pursuit of leadership and the base pleasures of this world.²¹

“Distortion” in Muslim writings before the 11th century CE

When we look at the views of early Muslim scholars, we find that their positions on the Bible were not limited to claims of textual or semantic distortion. Several demonstrated openness toward the reliability of those scriptures. Here are three examples from the 9th century CE:

- Al-Ya‘qūbī (d. 284 AH) quoted extensively from the Bible, summarizing the Injil books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and Acts, citing the crucifixion and resurrection narratives as told by Christians.²²
- Qadi Ibn Qutayba (d. 276 AH) used Biblical texts to interpret difficult ḥadīths in his *Ta’wīl Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth (The Book of Interpretation of Conflicting Hadiths)*, granting the Scriptures a high scholarly value.
- Imam al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm al-Rassī (d. 246 AH), founder of the Zaydī school, quoted extensively from the Injil book of Matthew in the Qur’anic style.

Before the 11th century CE, even in polemical works like *Al-Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā* by Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī (d. 248 AH), there was *no claim of textual distortion* of the Bible. Instead, scholars like al-Ṭabarī criticized Christian theology and interpretation, such as his claim of “aspects of contradiction and major sins... in their creed,” and he mentions “the distortion and corruption found in it”—that is, in the Christian *interpretation* of their book. Similarly, in his *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, he argued that if falsification were impossible in the Torah and Gospel, it must also be impossible in the Qur’an—highlighting his logical consistency.²³

In the 10th century, Abū al-Ḥasan al-‘Āmirī (d. 381 AH) and al-Bāqillānī (d. 403 AH) also refrained from claiming textual corruption. Al-‘Āmirī accused Jewish and Christian clergy of distorting symbolic meanings for fear of losing their positions if they acknowledged Muhammad's prophethood,²⁴ and al-Bāqillānī limited distortion to faulty translations from Hebrew to Arabic.²⁵

“Distortion” as defined by Muslim writers after the 11th century CE

A major shift occurred in the 11th century CE, starting with Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī (d. 456 AH) and his monumental text *Al-Fiṣal fī al-Milal wa al-Ahwā’ wa al-Niḥal (The Decisive Word on Religions, Sects, and Schools of Thought)*.

²¹ Al-Tabari, *Jamī’ al-Bayan*, previous reference, Vol. 6, pp. 603-604.

²² Al-Ya’qubi, *History*, p. 62

²³ Al-Tabari, Ali, *The Book of Religion and State (edited and translated by Alphonse Mingana)*, Manchester, 1923, p. 38.

²⁴ Al-Amiri, Abu al-Hasan Muhammad, *An Exposition on the Merits of Islam (edited by Abd al-Hamid Gharab)*, Cairo, 1967, p. 202.

²⁵ Al-Baqillani, Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn al-Tayyib, *The Book of Introduction to the Firsts and Summary of the Evidences (edited by Father Richard McCarthy)*, Beirut, 1957. Page 181

In this work, Ibn Hazim accused Jews and Christians of *textual* corruption—claiming conflicts and irrationalities in the Biblical text that “contradict the logic of reason.” It is worth noting that in his book, he did not limit his criticism to Judaism and Christianity – he also attacked all religious positions and sects that did not adhere to his Ṣāḥirīyah school of thought.

Ibn Hazim’s work marked a turning point: *taḥrīf* was now defined as “distortion of the text” (alteration), rather than “distortion of the meaning.” Most later scholars adopted this stance, moving interreligious exchange from *dialogue* to *polemics*. Examples include:

- *Shifā’ al-Ghalīl fī al-Tabdīl* by Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 478 AH)
- *Al-Ajwiba al-Fākhira* by Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 684 AH)
- *Hidāyat al-Ḥayārā* by Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751 AH)

Where things stand today

So, what is the general stance of Muslims today regarding the accusation of distortion against Jews and Christians?

It becomes clear that the Qur’anic term *taḥrīf* was not originally understood by most commentators as *textual alteration* (changing the words), but rather as *distortion of meaning* (misinterpretation and misuse of divine texts).

A careful review of early Islamic dialogical and polemical writings shows that the concept of *textual* corruption became dominant only from the 11th century onward, following Ibn Ḥazm’s works—coinciding with the beginning of the Crusades, which severely strained Christian-Muslim relations to the extent that tension still lingers today.

Thus, this article invites the modern Muslim reader to reconsider the contemporary stance that limits *taḥrīf* to the notion of textual alteration. Such a position ignores the standard interpretation of the first 400 years of Islamic history, and it leaves little room for constructive dialogue, since it denies the very scriptural foundation needed for Christian-Muslim mutual understanding. There is also a risk that, by embracing a more contemporary tradition that contradicts the Qur’an regarding how Muslims should interact with the Biblical Scriptures, it will result in direct disobedience to the commands of the Generous Qur’an.

In short, by highlighting earlier, more open-minded views held by major Muslim scholars before the 11th century, this article aims to offer alternative, more constructive models of dialogue—ones that promote understanding rather than hostility.