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 Muhammad 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.\textsuperscript{1} It has only become widely available to scholars in the last few decades. Muqāṭīl provides many interesting details in his exegesis of all of the tampering verses. The following description and analysis, however, will focus on what Muqāṭīl 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 ḥarrafā. 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.’\textsuperscript{2} For this reason, the ḥarrafā verses are examined in the greatest detail, along with three verses containing a second verb of alteration, baddala.

1. **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 (yuḥarrifūna) it, and that after they had understood it, knowingly?’ (Baqara 75)

Muqāṭīl explains the meaning of this verse by telling a story about the children of Israel from the ancient past.\textsuperscript{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,

