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Reconciling the Qurʾān and the Bible: A new approach to scriptural dialogue

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The Qurʾān's assertion of its divine preservation naturally raises questions about the status of earlier revelations like the Torah and Gospel, which it recognises as authentic divine guidance (āl-ʿImrān 3:3). This study examines why the Qurʾān would affirm these scriptures while certain verses appear to critique their transmission. Through analysis of shared narratives and theological concepts, it explores whether references to 'distortion' [*taḥrīf*] concern textual corruption or interpretive deviation. The findings suggest that critical verses target specific interpretations within Jewish and Christian traditions rather than the biblical text's integrity. This is evident in the Qurʾān's engagement with biblical stories – affirming core messages while providing complementary perspectives. Frequent references to biblical figures and events, along with explicit validation of earlier scriptures, reveal a theological framework that honours their divine origin. By separating textual preservation from interpretive history, the study presents a nuanced view of inter-scriptural relations, showing how the Qurʾān respects earlier revelations while advancing its own theological message and encouraging integrative over polemical approaches.

Contribution: This study clarifies Qurʾānic teachings on earlier scriptures and promotes constructive interfaith dialogue rooted in shared Abrahamic traditions. It proposes an integrative framework combining: (1) *intertextual analysis* of Qurʾānic-biblical parallels, showing how shared stories serve distinct theological aims; (2) *historical-critical study* of these variations within Late Antique debates on prophecy and identity; and (3) *reception history* tracing classical and modern interpretations. This model sees Qurʾānic adaptations as purposeful theological recontextualisations rather than claims of textual corruption.

Keywords: Qurʾānic exegesis; biblical exegesis; textual distortion; intertextuality; dialogue.

Introduction

Gordon Nickel's observation that Muslims might consider approaching the Bible with the same regard shown in the Qurʾān (Nickel 2015:15) highlights an important theological consideration. The Qurʾān's engagement with the Torah and Gospel has been extensively studied, reflecting both reverence for these texts and complex questions about their transmission. This intertextual relationship was occasionally acknowledged by medieval Muslim scholars like al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480), though most classical exegetes approached such connections cautiously (Goudie 2020:203; Guo 2001:28). While some Islamic interpretations have raised concerns about potential textual changes over time – including possible modifications by Jewish and Christian scholars (Sonn 2006:7–8) – such views represent one perspective among many within the tradition. The Qurʾān's frequent references to biblical figures and stories suggest a more nuanced relationship, inviting careful examination of how early scriptures are understood in Islamic thought and interfaith contexts.

Certain interpretations regarding scriptural transmission have drawn support from specific Qurʾānic verses sometimes referred to as 'tampering verses' [*āyāt al-taḥrīf*]. These include phrases such as *yuḥarrifūna al-kalima ʿan mawāḍiʿihī* (shifting words from their contexts) and *yaktubūna al-kitāb* (writing scripture themselves), which some scholars have understood as referring to textual modifications (Adang 2006:305). When considered alongside narrative differences between the Qurʾān and Bible – including accounts of the crucifixion, Jesus' nature, Abraham's test and Solomon's story – these verses have contributed to traditional Islamic perspectives about the Bible's textual history. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises these interpretations as one among several possible readings, with many experts emphasising the verses' potential focus on interpretive rather than textual changes (Swanson 2006:250).

A careful analysis reveals a notable divergence between the Qurʾān's own statements about earlier scriptures and certain interpretations found in later Islamic scholarship. While some exegetical traditions have emphasised claims of textual alteration, the Qurʾān itself consistently affirms the divine origin and fundamental authenticity of the Torah and Gospel. As noted by Burton (1994:95–107), this disparity suggests that the Qurʾān's critical verses may primarily address interpretive issues – such as selective application or doctrinal misunderstandings – rather than questioning the integrity of the biblical text itself. Reynolds (2010:190–193) further observes that the Qurʾān's so-called 'tampering verses' focus on how scripture is used or interpreted, without making explicit claims about physical change of the text. This distinction invites a reconsideration of traditional assumptions, highlighting the need to differentiate between the Qurʾān's direct statements and subsequent theological developments within Islamic thought.

The apparent tension between the Qurʾān's positive references to earlier scriptures and certain later interpretive traditions invites careful examination. To understand this development, it becomes valuable to study both the verses sometimes termed 'tampering verses' and the narrative variations between Qurʾānic and biblical accounts. Such analysis may help identify how interpretive approaches evolved while distinguishing between the Qurʾān's own perspective and subsequent theological elaborations within Islamic scholarship. This exploration could shed light on the scripture's authentic stance regarding previous revelations.

The Qurʾān consistently affirms the divine origin and spiritual value of the Torah and Gospel, maintaining a respectful tone towards these revelations. As scholars have noted, the text contains no direct claim that the biblical scriptures suffered textual corruption. Nickel (2015:5) observes that Qurʾānic verses mentioning earlier scriptures show no indication they were considered falsified or corrupt. Watt (1990:32) similarly notes the absence of any Qurʾānic assertion about comprehensive biblical text corruption.

A comprehensive examination reveals that when the Qurʾān specifically names previous scriptures, its references are uniformly positive (Nickel 2015:14). While acknowledging interpretive differences, the text appears more concerned with ensuring proper understanding of divine messages than with questioning textual integrity. The Qurʾān's engagement with biblical narratives and figures further demonstrates this respectful approach, suggesting its critique focuses primarily on certain interpretations rather than the scriptures themselves. This perspective invites reconsideration of traditional assumptions about the Qurʾān's stance, highlighting its fundamental recognition of previous revelations as authentic divine guidance while offering its distinctive theological insights.

This study demonstrates that the Qurʾān's engagement with earlier scriptures reflects a profound theological continuity rather than contradiction. By re-examining key verses and narrative parallels, we find the Qurʾān consistently affirms the divine origin and essential integrity of the Torah and Gospel, while offering its own distinctive perspective on their interpretation and application. The analysis reveals that so-called 'tampering verses' primarily address interpretive deviations rather than textual change, aligning with the Qurʾān's overarching reverence for previous revelations. Such an understanding not only resolves apparent discrepancies between the Qurʾānic and biblical accounts but also highlights their complementary roles in the Abrahamic tradition. These findings encourage moving beyond polemical approaches towards a more integrative hermeneutic that recognises the shared spiritual heritage of these scriptures while respecting their distinctive revelations. Ultimately, this framework fosters interfaith dialogue grounded in mutual recognition of divine wisdom manifest across revelations, opening new possibilities for theological exchange that honours both the Qurʾān's unique message and its profound connection to the biblical tradition.

This study employs a multi-layered methodological approach to analyse the Qurʾān's engagement with biblical narratives. Firstly, it adopts *intertextual analysis* to identify shared themes, linguistic parallels, and narrative structures between the two scriptures, while acknowledging their distinct theological frameworks. Secondly, it applies *historical-critical* and *redaction-critical* lenses to contextualise variations, distinguishing between potential transmission challenges and intentional theological adaptations. Thirdly, it incorporates *tafsīr* (Qurʾānic exegesis) and biblical scholarship to assess classical and modern interpretations of disputed passages. Crucially, differences are not automatically framed as contradictions but are evaluated through the Qurʾān's own hermeneutical principles – such as *tawḥīd* [divine unity] and *iʿjāz* [inimitability] – which may necessitate narrative recontextualisation. This methodology prioritises the Qurʾān's self-positioning as a 'confirming and preserving' (Qurʾān [Q] 5:48) revelation while allowing for dynamic dialogue with antecedent texts. By grounding comparisons in these criteria, the analysis moves beyond polemical binaries to explore how narrative variations reflect complementary theological objectives rather than textual corruption.

Qurʾānic references to the scriptural transmission of the Bible

Certain Qurʾānic verses, sometimes termed 'tampering verses' [*āyāt al-taḥrīf*], have been understood by some classical scholars as referring to changes in scriptural construction of the Bible. These passages, including examples cited by Reynolds (2010:193), Nickel (2015:9) and Adang (2006:304), have generated diverse interpretations regarding the relationship between Islamic and biblical textual traditions:

- **Sūrah al-Baqara 2:42**: 'Do not cover up ([*talbisū*]; cf. Q 3:71) the truth with falsehood and conceal ([*taktumū*]; cf. Q 2:140, 146, 159, 174; 3:71, 187) the truth, while you know it'.
- **Sūrah al-Baqara 2:79**: 'Woe to those who write [*yaktubūna*] revelation [*al-kitāb*] with their hands and then say, "This is from God".'

- **Sūrah āl-ʿImrān 3:78**: 'Among them is a group who twist their tongues [*yalwūna alsinatahum/layyan bi-alsinatihim*] with the revelation' (Cf. Q 4:46).
- **Sūrah al-Nisāʾ 4:46**: 'Among the Jews are those who shift [*yuḥarrifūna al-kalima 'an mawāḍiʿihī*]; cf.Q 2:75; 5:13, 41) words out of their contexts'.
- **Sūrah al-Māʾida 5:13–14**: 'Because they have violated their covenant, We cursed them and made their hearts hard. They shift words out of their contexts. They forgot [*nasū*] a portion of what was recounted to them. As for those who say, "We are Christians [*naṣārā*]', We made a covenant with them, but they forgot [*nasū*] a portion of what was recounted to them' (Cf. 7:53, 165).
- **Sūrah al-Māʾida 5:15**: 'O People of the Book, Our messenger has come to you to present much of what you were hiding [*tukhfūna*] of the truth'.

A linguistic analysis of the term taḥrīf in its Qurʾānic context reveals that it derives from the root ḥ-r-f [ف ر ح], which connotes 'to deviate, slant, or distort'. Notably, in classical Arabic usage, this verb often applies to oral misrepresentation rather than textual alteration (e.g. Q 4:46: yuḥarrifūna al-kalima 'an mawāḍi'ihī). This aligns with al-Rāzī's emphasis (1981:7/117) that the verse critiques interpretive manipulation (taḥrīf al-maʿnā) rather than physical corruption of the text.

Many medieval Muslim scholars, working within their historical theological frameworks, understood these Qurʾānic verses as addressing modifications in the transmission of earlier scriptures (Robinson 1991:46; Saleh 2016:406–423). Classical exegetes like al-Ṭabarī interpreted phrases such as *yaktubūna al-kitāb bi-aydīhim* (Q 2:79) as referring to textual variations that emerged in Jewish scriptural tradition. In his commentary, al-Ṭabarī cites earlier authorities like Mujāhid and Abū al-ʿĀliya, who suggested these verses indicated selective preservation of biblical material, particularly regarding prophecies of Muḥammad (Ṭabarī 1955:270). While these interpretations reflect particular historical understandings of Jewish-Christian scripture, contemporary scholarship recognises them as products of their intellectual milieu rather than definitive statements about textual integrity. The classical commentaries reveal more about medieval Islamic theological concerns than about the actual state of biblical texts, offering valuable insights into the development of interfaith polemics in the early Islamic period.

This contextual approach finds methodological support in Harald Motzki's seminal work on ḥadīth transmission. While Motzki does not directly address claims about biblical *tahrīf* (falsification) nor explicitly reject them, his analysis of Islamic textual traditions demonstrates how narratives and their interpretations could be shaped by contemporaneous polemical needs. Just as political factions during the Umayyad-Abbasid conflicts generated ḥadīths to legitimise their claims (Motzki 2005:208), and as legal schools engaged in 'backward growth of isnāds' to bolster authority (Motzki 2005:220), one might cautiously propose that certain Islamic narratives about biblical alteration similarly emerged from

interreligious apologetic contexts. Motzki's emphasis on examining the 'historical layers' and 'contextual imperatives' behind textual formation (2005:252) provides a critical framework for understanding such claims – not as objective historical judgements but as products of their theological environment. Thus, while classical exegesis offers indispensable insights into medieval Muslim perceptions of scripture, Motzki's methodology reminds us that these interpretations, like the ḥadīth corpus itself, must be analysed as historically contingent constructs rather than neutral descriptions of textual history.

In *Majmaʿ al-Bayān*, al-Ṭabarsī cites a narration attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās (via ʿIkrima) suggesting that Jewish scholars [*aḥbār*] encountered descriptions of the Prophet Muḥammad in the Torah, including physical traits like curly hair and medium stature (Ṭabarsī 2006:199–200). The account proposes these details were later omitted, and when Quraysh representatives enquired about the awaited prophet, they reportedly received an inaccurate description. While this *riwāyah* (also noted by al-Wāḥidī in *al-Wasīṭ*) reflects medieval Islamic scholarly discourse, modern scholarship (Mir 2006; Neuwirth 2019) generally views such narratives as theological rather than historical claims, illustrating how interfaith dynamics were conceptualised in classical exegesis.

At Qurʾān 3:78, al-Ṭabarī interpreted the phrase 'They twist their tongues [*yalwūna alsinatahum*]' as an act of fabricating words resembling divine revelation and inserting them into the Torah. He cited a narration [*riwāyah*] from Ibn ʿAbbās, stating, 'Those mentioned in the verse are Jews who sought to add to the Torah that which God never revealed to His prophets'. Similarly, Qatāda described them as 'Jews, adversaries of Allah, who altered the sacred book, tampering with it'. Mujāhid's transmission aligned with these accounts (Ṭabarī 1955:535–537). Al-Zamaḥsharī, on the other hand, suggested that the phrase referred to a group of Jews – Kaʿb b. al-Ashraf, Mālik b. al-Ṣayf, and Ḥuyay b. Aḥtab – who distorted the pronunciation and recitation of the words by twisting their tongues (Zamakhsharī 2009:178).

In Sūrah al-Nisāʾ 4:46, al-Rāzī proposed three interpretations for the phrase 'shifting words (yuḥarrifūna al-kalima)'. Firstly, he suggested that it could mean replacing words with others, such as substituting the description of Muḥammad as '*rubʾa* [a man of middle height]' with '*ādam ṭawīl* [tall man]' or changing '*rajm* [stoning]' to '*al-ḥad* [penalty]'. In this view, the Jews would have erased divine words and replaced them with their own. However, al-Rāzī found this interpretation implausible, as the Torah was too widely known and circulated to be easily altered. Secondly, he proposed that the phrase could refer to the distortion of the meaning of words through verbal tricks [*al-ḥiyal al-lafiẓyya*] and misinterpretations [*al-taʾwīlāt al-fāsida*], which led to doubts about the authenticity of the Torah's revelation. Lastly, he considered the possibility that it referred to the Jews regularly falsifying the teachings of Muḥammad, even as they asked him for guidance. Al-Rāzī favoured the second interpretation, as the first seemed unrealistic and the third was not directly

relevant to the context of the tampering verses (Rāzī 1981:7/117–118; 10/120–122).

In contrast to al-Rāzī, al-Zamaḫsharī interpreted the phrase 'shifting words [yuḥarrifūna al-kalima]' in Q 4:46 as referring to the corruption of the Torah by replacing divine words with human words. For example, he argues that the trait of Muḥammad described as 'rubʾa [a man of middle height]' and the term 'rajm [stoning]' were removed from the Torah and replaced with 'ādam ṭawīl [tall man]' and 'al-ḥad [penalty]', respectively (Zamakhsharī 2009:239).

In analysing the phrase 'They shift words out of their contexts' from Sūrah al-Māʾida 5:13–14, al-Rāzī maintained his earlier interpretation, suggesting two possible meanings: the first, the misinterpretation of the Bible [al-taʾwīl al-bāṭıl], and the second, the corruption of the Bible's text [taġyīr al-lafẓ]. He believed that the latter was unlikely because of the Bible's transmission through an unbroken chain [bi al-tawātur] by the Jewish and Christian communities, who could not have conspired to fabricate lies about God. Therefore, al-Rāzī concluded that the verse referred to misinterpretation [al-taʾwīl al-bāṭıl] (Rāzī 1981:191). Similarly, al-Qurṭubī adopted the misinterpretation view, understanding 'They shift words out of their contexts' as meaning 'They interpret the words incorrectly [yataʾawwalūnahū ʿalā ġayri tavīlihī]' (Qurṭubī 2006:7/381). In contrast, al-Ṭabarsī offered a more comprehensive interpretation of Q 5:13–14, acknowledging both textual and exegetical corruption of the Torah. He asserted that Jews distorted the meaning of God's words through incorrect interpretation and corrupted the text by replacing attributes of Muḥammad. Thus, for al-Ṭabarsī, the corruption of the Torah could be classified into two types: exegetical corruption [sūʾu taʾwīl] and textual corruption, referred to in Islamic sources as alteration [al-taġyīr] and substitution [al-tabdīl] (Ṭabarsī 2006:3/247).

According to al-Samarqandī, the phrase 'They shift words out of their contexts [yuḥarrifūna al-kalima]' was understood as referring to the alteration of Muḥammad's attributes, interpreting the corruption of the Bible [al-taḥrīf] as textual falsification (Samarqandī 1993:1/422–423). A thorough review of the commentaries reveals a broad consensus among Muslim commentators regarding the corruption [al-taḥrīf] of earlier scriptures, supported by traditions passed down from the companions of Muḥammad, al-Ṣaḥāba (e.g. Ibn ʿAbbās), and the followers of the companions, al-Tābiʿūn (e.g. Mujāhid, Qatāda, ʿIkrima, etc.). However, there was disagreement on the nature of this corruption: some exegetes (e.g. al-Zamaḫsharī, al-Samarqandī, al-Suyūṭī, etc.) interpreted al-taḥrīf as textual corruption (Zamakhsharī 2009:1/358), while others (e.g. al-Rāzī and al-Qurṭubī) believed it referred to exegetical corruption [tabdīlu al-qasd] (Rāzī 1981:7/117–118; 10/120–122; see also Qurṭubī 2006:7/381). Additionally, a smaller group of commentators (e.g. al-Ṭabarsī and al-Shawkānī) interpreted al-taḥrīf as involving both textual and exegetical corruption.

Classical exegesis on the concept of taḥrīf was far from monolithic, as demonstrated by the diversity of opinions among early Muslim scholars. While some exegetes (e.g. al-Zamaḫsharī and al-Samarqandī) interpreted taḥrīf as textual corruption, others (e.g. al-Rāzī and al-Qurṭubī) emphasised misinterpretation or selective application of scripture. A smaller group (e.g. al-Ṭabarsī) combined both perspectives. This spectrum of views reflects the dynamic nature of classical tafsir literature and cautions against oversimplifying the Islamic scholarly tradition's approach to earlier revelations.

A careful examination of the relevant Qurʾānic verses suggests that the concept of taḥrīf primarily concerns interpretive deviations [taḥrīf maʿnā] rather than textual corruption [taḥrīf lafẓ]. While some ambiguity persists in these passages, leading to ongoing scholarly debate, the Qurʾān's broader context – particularly its affirming references to earlier scriptures (e.g. Q 2:41, 97; 3:3) – offers important clarification. As Nickel notes, the few ambiguous verses should be weighed against the Qurʾān's overwhelmingly positive stance towards the Torah and Gospel.

Accad (2003:71) further observes that accusations of taḥrīf in the Qurʾān appear contextually limited and linguistically oriented towards misinterpretation rather than textual alteration. This distinction is crucial, as projecting later polemical concepts onto the Qurʾān's terminology risks anachronism. The text's critical verses seem directed at specific historical interpretations, not the integrity of the biblical text as a whole. Thus, while traditional Islamic scholarship has sometimes extended these verses to claims of textual corruption, the Qurʾān's own framework appears more nuanced, focusing on hermeneutical rather than textual issues. This aligns with its consistent recognition of previous revelations as divinely originated.

It is noteworthy that the Qurʾān's critical verses primarily address certain practices and interpretations among the People of the Book rather than rejecting their scriptures outright. The text maintains a consistent recognition of the divine origin of the Bible, with any critical remarks being directed towards human actions rather than the texts themselves. As Abdullah Saeed observes, 'The Qurʾān contains no derogatory statements about Jewish and Christian scriptures themselves, only respectful references. Any criticism focuses on specific behaviors or interpretations among their adherents' (Nickel 2015:15). This distinction is crucial – the Qurʾān's occasional reproofs stem from theological disagreements with certain interpretations or practices, not from claims about textual corruption. Such an understanding aligns with the Qurʾān's broader pattern of affirming previous revelations while offering its own guidance for correct belief and practice.

A comprehensive reading of the Qurʾān reveals a nuanced approach to previous revelations. While certain verses critique specific interpretations or practices among Jewish

and Christian communities, the text consistently affirms the divine origin and authenticity of the Torah and Gospel. As Lazarus-Yafeh observes, the Qurʾān presents these scriptures as genuine revelations originating from the same divine source as itself (Yafeh 2000). This positive framework is sometimes overlooked because of the more attention-grabbing nature of critical passages. Nickel's analysis further supports this view, noting that the Qurʾān's direct references to earlier scriptures maintain a uniformly respectful tone (Nickel 2015:13). The text appears to presume the continued availability and integrity of these revelations, with no indication that their core message had been fundamentally altered. This suggests that the Qurʾān's occasional criticisms could be understood as addressing particular historical circumstances rather than rejecting the scriptures themselves.

The Qurʾān's critical passages regarding the People of the Book consistently address interpretive practices rather than the integrity of the biblical text itself. While challenging certain interpretations, the Qurʾān fundamentally affirms the divine origin of earlier scriptures, as evidenced by its repeated exhortations for Jews and Christians to uphold their authentic teachings. The concept of *taḥrīf* in the Qurʾān appears primarily concerned with hermeneutical deviations rather than textual corruption – a distinction supported by Radscheit's observation that the Qurʾān never explicitly associates *taḥrīf* with the physical alteration of scriptures (Nickel 2015:17). This balanced approach demonstrates the Qurʾān's nuanced position: offering its own religious insight and spiritual wisdom while maintaining reverence for previous revelations, thereby fostering a theological framework that acknowledges both continuity and development within the Abrahamic scriptural tradition.

Narrative variations as theological dialogue

This study approaches narrative variations through the lens of deliberate intertextual recontextualisation – a process whereby the Qurʾān adapts shared traditions to reinforce its distinctive theological vision. Drawing on theories of scriptural reuse (Neuwirth 2019; Rippin 1985), we identify three key mechanisms: (1) Selective omission (removing elements incongruent with Qurʾānic theology); (2) narrative refocusing (shifting emphasis to new moral or theological points); and (3) hermeneutical correction (reinterpreting ambiguous or contested elements). These mechanisms operate not as corrections of textual corruption but as dynamic engagements with living interpretive traditions.

The golden calf story

A key factor in discussions about biblical transmission stems from apparent narrative variations between the Qurʾān and Bible. Classical commentators like Ibn ʿʿĀshūr, analysing stories such as the golden calf (Q 20:85–95), occasionally suggested these variations might reflect transmission challenges in the biblical text. In *al-Taḥrīr waʾl-Tanwīr*, Ibn ʿʿĀshūr cautiously suggests that narrative variations in the

golden calf story (Q 20:85–95) may reflect challenges in preserving the Torah's original form after the Babylonian exile.

The biblical version of the story describes how the Israelites, seeing that Moses was delayed in returning from the mountain, gathered around Aaron to create a God to lead them. Aaron took their gold earrings, fashioned them into a calf idol and the people worshipped it. This act of idolatry angered both God and Moses, as it represented a grave transgression against the monotheistic faith. Aaron then defends his actions by blaming the people, saying, 'Do not be angry, my lord … You know how prone these people are to evil' (Ex 32:22). In the aftermath, Moses summoned the Levites to take action, and they killed about 3000 people involved in the idolatry. The Qurʾān recounts this narrative with a few changes, including the addition of certain characters and the removal of others (Pregill 2007:643–644). Despite these modifications, the Qurʾān preserves the core message and does not alter the story's central theme. These changes are part of the Qurʾān's method of adapting previous narratives to its own rhetorical style and message. In this context, such modifications in the transmission of such accounts are acceptable, reflecting the broader Islamic tradition of adapting stories to fit the theological and narrative frameworks of the Qurʾān.

Islamic scholarship is well acquainted with the practice of narrative adaptation, a method that is often seen in the transmission of prophetic traditions [*ḥadīth*] and early scholarly accounts [*riwāyah*]. It is common for a tradition to vary across different versions, particularly with respect to the actions and roles of key characters. Despite these variations, the central message or moral of the tradition remains intact. This is an established feature of Islamic storytelling, where certain elements may be added or omitted in different narrations, but the essential teachings remain consistent. A similar approach is seen in the Qurʾān's retelling of the golden calf story:

- In the Qurʾān, Aaron offers two justifications for his actions, which differ from the single justification found in the Torah. In the Qurʾān, when Moses questions Aaron, saying, 'What held thee back when thou didst see them gone astray?' (Q 20:94), Aaron responds, 'I feared lest thou shouldst say: Thou hast caused division among the Children of Israel, and hast not respected my word'. In another verse (Q 7:150), Aaron adds, 'The folk judged me weak and almost killed me'. In contrast, the Torah presents Aaron's defence as: 'Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil'. While the wording in the Qurʾān differs, both versions share a common underlying theme: the Israelites' susceptibility to idolatry and their desire for visible gods in the form of the calf. Aaron, in both accounts, is portrayed as a less culpable figure than the Israelites themselves, as he is seen as a mere instrument of God's test. This is why both the Qurʾān and the Torah place greater blame on the Israelite community than on Aaron.

- The Qurʾān uniquely mentions Moses' perceived mistreatment of Aaron: 'Aaron replied: O son of my mother! Clutch not my beard nor my head!' and 'And he (Moses) cast down the tablets, and he seized his brother by the head, dragging him toward him'. Although the Torah does not explicitly describe these actions, it alludes to them in the phrase: 'What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?'
- The Qurʾān introduces the character of 'Sāmirī', who is described as leading the Israelites astray by taking a handful of dust from the Messenger's footprint and using it in the making of the calf. Some scholars interpret Sāmirī as the creator of the calf, attributing the action in Q 20:87 ('and thus did the Sāmirī throw') to the subsequent phrase in Q 20:88 ('Then he moulded for them an idol of a calf'). However, the Qurʾān does not explicitly link the subject of the verb 'moulded' to Sāmirī, leaving the subject vague in a manner similar to the verb 'nasiya' [forgot], which does not specify a direct subject.

Another factor contributing to the notion of corruption is that there are several elements absent in the Qurʾān's version of the narratives. Examining the golden calf episode specifically, we observe several noteworthy omissions:

- The Qurʾān does not mention that Moses gathered the Levites and killed about 3000 of the people who worshipped the idol, a detail that is present in the Torah.
- While the Torah explicitly states that Aaron crafted the idol by moulding it into the shape of a golden calf, the Qurʾān offers only subtle hints about Aaron's involvement in the creation of the calf, without making a direct declaration.

As observed, certain figures, actions and words have been omitted in the Qurʾān's retelling, while others have been introduced. These differences, however, do not undermine the core integrity of the story. Some scholars, such as Ibn ʿʿĀshūr, have posited that the maker of the calf in the Torah is Aaron, while in the Qurʾān, it is Sāmirī, suggesting the textual incompatibility in the transmission of the common narratives between the two scriptures. From this perspective, they have cautiously proposed that the Torah may have undergone textual variations during its transmission by rabbinic authorities. However, such interpretations may not fully account for the nuanced presentation in the Qurʾān. While Sāmirī's role in misleading the Israelites is emphasised in Qurʾān 20:85–87, the text does not explicitly identify him as the maker of the calf in Qurʾān 20:88. Some commentators have extended the narrative connection between these verses beyond what the text clearly states, creating a perceived discrepancy with the Torah account that may be more interpretive than textual. The Qurʾān's deliberate narrative style leaves certain details open to interpretation rather than presenting definitive contradictions. This narrative ambiguity may reflect engagement with alternative Jewish interpretive traditions. Recent scholarship suggests Qurʾānic exegesis occasionally incorporated Isrāʾīliyyāt – including Talmudic and Midrashic accounts (e.g. Ex Rabbah 41:7 on Aaron's

dilemma) – to illuminate such passages (Ross 2023:150–200), though always filtered through Islamic theological priorities.

As demonstrated, this approach *appears to represent* a specific method of interpretation (exegesis), where, when the subject or doer of a verb is unclear [muġlaq] or ambiguous [mubham], exegetes tend to assign the most fitting subject based on context – as may have occurred at Q 20:88. That said, considering the context, it could also be argued that Aaron might serve as the subject for the verb in Q 20:88, given that he arguably emerges as the most logical figure potentially involved in fashioning the calf. One might infer that Aaron could have been aware of this as a divine test of the Israelites' devotion, possibly explaining his purported role in the calf's creation. His subsequent call to worship Moses' God (Q 20:90) seems to reflect this theological purpose (Neuwirth 2019). Additionally, as Moses' appointed successor, Aaron would probably have been involved in the process, suggesting the people unlikely acted without his oversight.

Therefore, such Qurʾānic revelations are open to multiple interpretations because of their obscurity, ambiguity and compact structure. While some textual nuances might cautiously suggest Aaron's potential awareness of the calf's creation, classical exegetes overwhelmingly emphasise his passive resistance (Q 7:150) rather than active involvement, and the Qurʾān's primary critique targets collective Israelite disobedience rather than Aaron's individual actions. Because none of these interpretations is definitive or conclusive, it would be an overstatement and methodologically questionable to claim that the Bible has undergone textual alterations based on any particular reading of these verses. In light of this, no single reading can be considered binding, nor should differences necessarily imply the Bible's textual corruption.

In addition to that, the Qurʾān never recounts the whole story; instead, it gives some significant fragments to highlight the divine message; therefore, the figures and their actions in the story are not as important as the main message (Rippin 2019:23). From the Qurʾānic perspective, regardless of who fashioned the calf, the central message concerns the spiritual shortcomings revealed through this episode – both among the Israelite community and in Aaron's inability to adequately guide them away from idolatrous worship.

One of the central arguments in Andrew Rippin's *Literary Analysis of Koran, Tafsir, and Sira* is that the historical narratives in the Qurʾān – particularly those shared with the broader Abrahamic tradition – are deliberately elliptical, constructed in a 'referential' manner. This structural feature suggests that the verses are not intended to be fixed in a rigid historical framework but are rather designed to invite multilayered interpretations. In this context, Rippin emphasises that the asbāb al-nuzūl reports were not meant to document historical events but served instead to construct narrative settings within exegetical discourse. Their value lies not in historical accuracy but in interpretive function. This underscores the idea that the Qurʾānic narratives often leave intentional gaps,

prompting classical exegetes to fill these gaps through contextual reasoning and commentary (Rippin 1985:152).

In parallel, Rippin contends that the Qurʾān does not merely replicate earlier sacred texts but reworks inherited narrative motifs within the framework of Judeo-Christian sectarian polemics. Thus, variations in Qurʾānic storytelling should not be viewed as textual corruption but as purposeful narrative adaptation. The Qurʾān's goal is not to reproduce the Bible in Arabic but to construct its own theological discourse using inherited themes. This perspective is consistent with Rippin's classification of the Qurʾān as a form of 'salvation history' – a genre that does not chronicle factual events but rather affirms divine involvement in human affairs through literary means. Accordingly, Qurʾānic stories are not to be taken as direct reflections of historical reality but as strategic narrative instruments that serve the construction of sacred history (Rippin 1985:153–154, 156).

A close reading of the Qurʾānic text reveals certain nuanced elements that might be interpreted as hinting at Aaron's possible connection to the golden calf incident. Firstly, in Q 20:88, the verb 'fashion [aḥraja]' appears without an explicit subject, mirroring the grammatical ambiguity of nearby verbs like 'say [qālū]' and 'forget [nasiya]'. Notably, some exegetical traditions have favoured interpreting Sāmirī as the implied subject of 'aḥraja', though no such consensus exists regarding the other verbs' subjects [qālū and nasiya]. Secondly, in Q 20:95, when Moses questions Sāmirī about his involvement, Sāmirī does not explicitly claim to have made the calf, but instead explains: 'I saw what they saw not, I took a handful (of dust) from the footprint of the Messenger, and threw it (into the calf)'. This indirect response raises questions about the true origin of the calf's creation.

Thirdly, Moses' reaction upon seeing the people's deviation includes a notably harsh interaction with Aaron, such as grabbing his beard and head (Q 7:150), which is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah. Moses' reprimands could be interpreted as suggesting Aaron's potential greater involvement than the text explicitly states, as his condemnation of the actions during his absence implies some degree of shared responsibility. Fourthly, while Aaron could have blamed Sāmirī directly by saying, 'I did not make it, but Sāmirī did', Aaron defends himself by offering alternative justifications, such as claiming that the people had judged him weak and nearly killed him (Q 7:150). These defences suggest that Aaron might have been implicated in the incident, even if his role was not as the primary maker of the calf.[1]

Fifthly, the Israelites' documented inclination towards idol worship, attested in both the Torah and Qurʾān (Ex 20:5; Lv 19:4, 26:1; Q 7:138), suggests their request for an idol may reflect a recurring tendency. Notably, shortly after leaving Egypt, they petitioned Moses to create an idol for them (Q 7:138).

1.In support of that, one can refer to the verse in the Qurʾān 'the folk did judge me weak and almost killed me' (Q 7:150), and the passage in the Torah 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us' (Ex 32:1).

If Sāmirī alone were responsible for the calf, it would be unexpected for the people – who had previously sought Moses' intervention – not to make similar demands of Aaron during Moses' absence. This context raises the possibility that the same group (including Sāmirī and his followers) who approached Moses later redirected their request to Aaron, who – as both texts imply – may have reluctantly acquiesced because of fear or political pressure.

The Qurʾānic emphasis on Sāmirī's role in promoting calf worship does not inherently contradict the Torah's attribution of responsibility to Aaron. Rather, the narratives appear complementary: Sāmirī and his followers instigated the idol's creation, while Aaron's perceived compliance under duress allowed the act to proceed. This reading harmonises the accounts – the Torah focuses on Aaron's leadership failure, while the Qurʾān highlights the community's external influences. Such differences in emphasis need not imply textual corruption; instead, they demonstrate how each scripture contextualises the event within its theological framework. Ultimately, both texts recount the same essential episode, with variations that invite reconciliation rather than conflict (Neuwirth 2019:347–378; Ledit 1956: 50–69).

Finally, Moses' subsequent plea for forgiveness – potentially encompassing his own role in enabling the incident – lends weight to the interpretation that Aaron may have been indirectly involved. While the Qurʾānic text does not explicitly confirm Aaron's complicity, Moses' dual repentance (for both his departure and his brother's actions) suggests Aaron's possible acquiescence, whether through passive allowance or reluctant participation.

When examined holistically, these textual nuances indicate that Aaron's connection to the calf's creation, though not definitively established, emerges as a plausible reading within the Qurʾānic framework. Consequently, the perceived contradiction between the Qurʾān's and Torah's accounts of the calf's authorship appears overstated upon closer analysis. Given the interpretive flexibility of both narratives, the alleged discrepancy cannot serve as conclusive and binding evidence for claims of biblical alteration.

The identity of the son offered as a sacrifice

The identity of Abraham's son in the sacrifice narrative presents an interesting case of scriptural interpretation. The Torah's account in Genesis 22:2 provides specific details: 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah …'. This explicit mention of Isaac's name along with the geographical location creates a clear narrative framework with minimal ambiguity. The Qurʾānic version in Surah 37:101, while addressing the same event, presents the story differently: 'So We gave him tidings of a gentle son [ghulām]', without specifying which son is intended. This difference in narrative style has led to various interpretations among Islamic scholars across generations (mutaqaddimūn and mutaʾaḫḫirūn).

Some exegetes have proposed that the Qurʾānic reference points to Ishmael, particularly when considering the subsequent verse (Q 37:112), which mentions Isaac's prophethood: 'We gave him tidings of Isaac – a prophet – one of the Righteous'. These scholars argue that if both verses referred to Isaac, there would be redundancy in announcing his birth twice. This perspective suggests the first announcement concerns Ishmael, while the second addresses Isaac's prophetic future (Qurṭubī 2006:15/97; Ṭabarī 1955:21/72–100). However, alternative interpretations merit careful consideration. A close reading suggests that verse 37:112 may not be announcing Isaac's birth but rather his future prophetic status, with the first announcement (Q. 37:101) referring to his miraculous birth to aged parents. This sequential reading finds support in the works of respected scholars, including early authorities like ʿOmar, ʿAli, ʿAbbās b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, Kaʾb al-Aḥbār, Qatāda, Saʿīd ibn Jubayr, ʿIkrima and Ibn Masʿūd, as well as later commentators such as al-Rāzī (1981:153).

The linguistic context strengthens this interpretation. The term *bashshara* [glad tidings] in the Qurʾān typically denotes extraordinary announcements, making it particularly suitable for Isaac's miraculous birth to the elderly Sarah, as opposed to Ishmael's birth to Hagar, which occurred under normal circumstances. This suggests the first announcement (37:101) more likely refers to Isaac's birth, while the second concerns his prophethood. These differing interpretations highlight how scriptural narratives can employ distinct approaches while maintaining theological coherence, with variations reflecting different narrative purposes rather than substantive contradictions. The Torah's explicit identification serves its historical narrative, while the Qurʾān's more elliptical reference aligns with its thematic focus on Abraham's test of faith.

Similarly, the verb 'giving good tidings [*bushrā* or *bashshara*]' is employed in the context of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, as both events occurred under exceptional circumstances – Zachariah (the father of John) was advanced in age and his wife was infertile, while Mary (the mother of Jesus) was a virgin. In such cases, the verb '*bashshara*' reflects an extraordinary occurrence, with a low probability of happening, akin to the situation of an infertile woman giving birth. Given that Isaac's birth also occurred under similar extraordinary circumstances, it seems reasonable to interpret him as the son offered to God as a sacrifice.

The biblical account of Ishmael's departure (Gn 21:8–13) presents additional contextual considerations. After Sarah observed Ishmael 'mocking' Isaac, Abraham reluctantly sent Hagar and Ishmael away to the wilderness (*Beer-Sheba*). This narrative tension could imply Abraham's deeper emotional bond with Isaac, the son who remained within the familial covenant. Some scholars cautiously suggest this might make Isaac a more theologically fitting candidate for the sacrifice test, as the narrative emphasises Abraham's devotion through the potential loss of his promised heir.

Therefore, it may be difficult to conclusively argue for textual alteration in the Torah based on this narrative difference. The available evidence suggests the son in both texts was likely Isaac, though some interpretive ambiguity remains. While the Qurʾān doesn't explicitly name the son, contextual clues – particularly the miraculous birth motif – appear to favour Isaac. Thus, claims of a substantive contradiction between the scriptures might be overstated given these considerations.

God's resting on the 7th day

The perceived discrepancy regarding God's activity after creation has been carefully examined by classical scholars like Ṭabarī and Qurṭubī (Böwering 2002:326–327). The Torah states God 'rested on the seventh day' (Gn 2:2), while the Qurʾān employs different terminology, mentioning God mounting the Throne' ([*istawā*], Q 25:59) and explicitly denying any divine fatigue (Q 50:38). This variation in expression has led to thoughtful scholarly discussions about the nature of divine activity. Rather than representing a fundamental contradiction, these differences may reflect distinct theological emphases within each tradition. The Hebrew verb *shavat* [to cease] and the Arabic *istawā* [to establish] both convey completion of creation without necessarily implying physical rest. The Qurʾān's specific denial of weariness [*luġūb*] might be understood as clarifying the metaphorical nature of such anthropomorphic expressions, a concern shared by both Jewish and Islamic exegetical traditions.

Certain scholars have examined the Torah's description of God 'resting' [*istarāḥa*] on the 7th day (Gn 2:2), with some suggesting this could be misinterpreted as implying divine fatigue. This reading appears to contrast with the Qurʾānic emphasis that 'no weariness' [*luġūb*] affected God during creation (Q 50:38). Commentators like Ṭabarī, Qurṭubī and Bayḍāwī proposed that the Qurʾān's use of *istawā* [established Himself on the Throne] (Q 25:59) may serve to clarify God's transcendence, avoiding anthropomorphic implications that could arise from the verb 'rest' (Bayḍāwī 2000:3/318; Qurṭubī 2006:460; Ṭabarī 1955:22/375). Rather than a corrective, this difference might reflect distinct theological vocabularies – the Torah's *shavat* [ceased] emphasising completion, while the Qurʾān's *istawā* underscores divine sovereignty. Both traditions ultimately affirm God's absolute power, with the variation likely stemming from their unique revelatory contexts and linguistic nuances. The Qurʾān's explicit denial of fatigue could thus be seen as complementary rather than contradictory to the Torah's narrative framework.

The interpretation of God's 'rest' in Genesis 2:2 may stem from a linguistic nuance worth noting. The Hebrew verbs *lehashbît* [לְהַשְׁבִּית] and *Shabat* [שָׁבַת] fundamentally denote cessation or completion of work rather than physical rest or fatigue.[2] This suggests the Torah's description likely emphasises God's transition from creating to sustaining, not fatigue.

2.See Brown, Driver and Briggs (1906). For more literal explanation see also Benner (2005).

The Qurʾān's denial of divine weariness (Q 50:38) thus appears complementary rather than corrective, as both traditions conceptually agree on God's transcendence while employing different metaphorical language appropriate to their respective revelatory contexts.

Claims of textual alteration based on this narrative difference appear linguistically untenable upon closer analysis. The variations instead reflect appropriate adaptations of divine description to different revelatory contexts and audiences. Rather than evidence of corruption, these distinct expressions collectively enrich our understanding of how sacred texts communicate God's absolute perfection while using human language. Such nuanced reading honours both traditions' integrity while acknowledging their distinctive rhetorical approaches.

Solomon's fall

In this context, another area of interpretive complexity emerges from the Torah's narrative regarding Solomon's later years, which mentions: 'His wives turned away his heart after other Gods… For Solomon went after Ashtoreth, the Goddess of the Sidonians … did not fully follow Jehovah' (1 Ki 11:4–11). These verses have raised concerns among some readers (Qurṭubī 2006:15/192; Ṭabarī 1955:21/191–209), especially when compared with the Qurʾānic portrayal: 'It was not Solomon who disbelieved, but the devils disbelieved' (Q 2:102), and 'And to David We gave Solomon. An excellent servant; indeed, he was one repeatedly turning back (to Allah)' (Q 38:30). Based on this contrast, it has been argued that the biblical account may reflect a different interpretive lens. Yet, a closer look at the Qurʾānic narrative suggests a more nuanced understanding than a simple accusation of textual distortion.

Specifically, Qurʾān 38:30–40 is best understood within the broader framework of the Qurʾān's figurative and refined style when referring to the human shortcomings of prophets. The Qurʾān generally avoids direct or explicit mention of morally sensitive issues – such as those involving personal conduct – and instead presents such matters through layered expressions and suggestive parables that preserve the dignity of prophetic figures. A clear example of this subtle narrative method appears in the story of 'David and the ninety-nine ewes' (Q 38:21–30). In this account, two disputants come to David. One says: 'Verily, this is my brother; he has ninety-nine ewes, and I have only one ewe. Yet he says: "Give it to me," and he overpowered me in speech'. David responds:

> 'He has certainly wronged you in demanding your ewe in addition to his own. Truly, many partners oppress one another, except those who believe and do good deeds – and they are few.' (Q 38:21–30).

According to several classical exegetes, this story is interpreted as a symbolic way of conveying a divine admonition to David (Ṭabarī 1955:21/191–209). The parable is thought to allude indirectly to David's lapse in marrying Bathsheba, and the narrative serves as a dignified, metaphorical form of guidance rather than a direct reproach.

This narrative exemplifies the Qurʾān's tendency to use indirect language and metaphors to present moral lessons while preserving the dignity of the figures involved. In the case of Solomon, the Qurʾān's method is no different. By portraying the errors in a more figurative and refined way, it avoids the crude attribution of sin, in line with its broader theological approach to prophetic sanctity. Thus, while the Torah presents Solomon as succumbing to idolatry because of the influence of his wives, the Qurʾān provides a more nuanced view, emphasising that Solomon himself did not disbelieve, but rather the devils were responsible for leading people astray. This difference in presentation reflects the Qurʾān's distinctive rhetorical and theological style (Mir 2006:88–106). It does not necessarily indicate a contradiction with the core narrative found in the Torah. Divergent narrative styles or emphases between scriptures may arise from differing theological and literary aims and do not, in themselves, imply a fundamental inconsistency in the overarching message or the essential outline of the story.

Following this episode, the Qurʾān continues to recount, 'David realized that it was We who had tested him, so he sought forgiveness from his Lord, fell down in prostration, and turned to Him in repentance' (Q 38:24). This raises an important question: Why would David seek forgiveness and repentance after fulfilling what appears to be a moderating and just role between two disputants? The answer becomes clearer when examining the fuller narrative as presented in the Torah. There, the story unveils that the 99 ewes mentioned in the Qurʾānic account symbolise the 99 wives or women that David had in reality. The one ewe belonging to the other man symbolises Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. According to the Torah, David desired Bathsheba and orchestrated a situation in which her husband was sent to the frontlines of battle, ensuring his death. After Uriah's demise, David took Bathsheba as his own (Qurṭubī 2006:15/161–192; Suyūṭī 2003:7/153–175; Ṭabarī 1955:21/174–191). The Qurʾān, however, refrains from explicitly narrating this moral transgression in detail. Instead, it employs metaphoric language, consistent with its methodology of addressing the shortcomings of prophets in a way that preserves their dignity. David's act of repentance in the Qurʾānic account reflects his acknowledgement of his error and his return to God in humility, embodying the exemplary moral conduct expected of a prophet even in moments of human frailty.[3]

A similar interpretive approach can be applied to the episode of Solomon *and the light-footed horses* (Q 38:30–35)'. The Qurʾān recounts that Solomon, captivated by the sight of magnificent, swift horses presented to him at dusk, became so enchanted by their beauty that he momentarily neglected the remembrance of his Lord. When the horses vanished from sight – hidden, as the verse describes, 'in the veil' [*tawārat bi al-ḥijāb*] – Solomon commanded their return. Upon their reappearance, he began passing his hands over their necks and legs in a gesture of affection. Soon after, realising

3. '… From the roof David saw a woman bathing… Then David sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her… And the woman conceived… David wrote a letter to Joab, saying: 'Set Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retreat from him, that he (Uriah) may be struck down and die' (2 Sm 11:1–15).

that this incident was a divine test, Solomon turned to God in repentance and sought forgiveness, much like his father David (Neuwirth 2019:347–378).

This account raises a parallel question to the earlier one concerning David: Why did Solomon seek forgiveness after engaging with the horses in this manner? Turning to the biblical narrative as a potential interpretive lens, we find contextual elements that could enrich our understanding of this Qurʾānic passage. The biblical narrative (1 Ki 11:1–3) describes Solomon's numerous political marriages to foreign princesses – including Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites – which reportedly influenced his spiritual commitments. When read in light of the Torah's account, the Qurʾānic portrayal of Solomon's horses [al-ṣāfināt al-jiyād] may carry symbolic significance. The phrase 'hidden in the veil' [tawārat bi al-ḥijāb] metaphorically represents these women, while Solomon's act of passing his hand over the horses' necks and legs [meshan bi al-sūqi wa al-aʿnāq] corresponds to his caressing and physical affection towards his wives. Furthermore, Solomon's admission, 'I gave preference to the love of good things [beautiful women] over the remembrance of my Lord' (Q 38:32), echoes the Torah's account: 'King Solomon loved many foreign women ... He clung to these women in love … his wives turned his heart away from being with God' (1 Ki 11:1–7).

Our interpretation that not all Qurʾānic expressions should be understood literally but may carry symbolic meanings can find support in the metaphorical exegesis [taʾwīl] of scholars such as al-Māturīdī and Ibn ʿĀshūr. In his commentary on Q 48:10 ('Allah's hand is over their hands'), al-Māturīdī interprets the word 'hand' [yad] as signifying Allah's support and empowerment of the Prophet rather than indicating a physical form, thereby demonstrating that this term cannot be understood in its literal sense (al-Māturīdī 2005:9/298–300). Similarly, Ibn ʿĀshūr explains that Qurʾān 17:24 ('lower the wing of humility for them [parents] out of mercy') cannot refer to literal wings because humans have none; rather, the expression serves as a metaphorical representation [al-istiʾāra al-tamthīliyya] of voluntary submission and tender affection towards parents (Ibn ʿʿĀshūr 1984:15/65–74). These examples clearly show that Qurʾānic expressions often convey metaphorical and symbolic meanings beyond their literal sense (Boulaouali 2021:120–132; Mir 1989:2–3). This hermeneutical principle lends support to this study's proposed interpretation that the term 'khayl' (horses) in the Solomon narrative may metaphorically allude to women.

However, modern exegetes have generally interpreted Solomon's horses not as symbolic entities but as real, physical beings, viewing his attachment to them as a divine test. For instance, Muhammad Makhlūf explains that the horses mentioned in these verses were warhorses belonging to Solomon's army, and that his missing the ʿAṣr prayer while admiring them served as a form of trial. Similarly, Ṣābūnī asserts that the horses distracted Solomon from remembering God, which led him to sacrifice them. In contrast, Yusuf Ali claims that Solomon's love for the horses was driven by a desire to earn God's pleasure and that he did not kill them but merely caressed them. These interpretations reflect a literal reading of the Solomon narrative and reject any symbolic understanding of the horses (Johns 1997:260–262).

The verse states: 'innī aḥbabtu ḥubba l-khayri ʿan dhikri rabbī' (Q 38:32), traditionally translated as 'I preferred the love of worldly goods over my Lord's remembrance'. However, given the phonological resonance and lexical proximity between al-khayri [الخير] and al-khayl ([الخيل], 'horses'), it invites reconsideration. This potential paronomasia [jinās] finds contextual support in Solomon's equestrian narrative ([ṣāfināt al-jiyād], 38:31–33), the Qurʾān's penchant for homophonic symbolism, and comparative scriptural traditions that allegorise Solomon's attachments through analogous imagery.

The Solomon narratives in both scriptures reflect broader ancient Near Eastern literary traditions while employing distinct narrative approaches. The Bible's account of political marriages (1 Ki 11) mirrors regional royal historiographies that frame foreign alliances as both strategic assets and spiritual risks – a motif well attested in Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts. The Qurʾān's allegorical portrayal (Q 38:30–35), with its potential al-khayri or al-khayl wordplay and symbolic horses, aligns with Late Antique trends of encoding moral lessons through symbolic narratives, as seen in Syriac Christian and Rabbinic exegesis. These differences stem not from substantive contradictions but from complementary theological emphases: where the Bible provides political-historical contextualisation of Solomon's challenges, the Qurʾān elevates the story's ethical dimensions through its characteristic parabolic style (Neuwirth 2019:347–378). Both ultimately converge in their portrayal of Solomon's repentance, demonstrating how shared cultural frameworks could be adapted to different revelatory purposes – the Bible as political theology, the Qurʾān as ethical parable – while maintaining theological coherence about prophetic humanity and divine mercy.

Conclusion

This study yields three key findings: Firstly, the Qurʾān's critical verses (e.g. Q 4:46) primarily address interpretive deviations [taḥrīf al-maʿnā] rather than textual corruption, as evidenced by classical exegetes like al-Rāzī and Ibn ʿʿĀshūr. Secondly, narrative variations (e.g. Solomon's horses) reflect deliberate theological recontextualisation, not arbitrary alterations. Thirdly, the Islamic exegetical tradition itself accommodated diverse readings of biblical parallels, as seen in al-Biqāʿī's work (Guo 2001).

The Qurʾān's engagement with previous scriptures reveals a sophisticated theological approach that balances reverence with reinterpretation. While certain verses (e.g. Q 4:46, 5:13) have been traditionally read as critiques of textual integrity, closer examination suggests they primarily address interpretive communities rather than the scriptures themselves. The text's repeated affirmations of the Torah and

Gospel's divine origin (Q 3:3, 5:68) create an interesting tension with its occasional critical remarks – a duality that invites us to consider how revelation interacts with human interpretation across generations. This nuanced position acknowledges both the enduring value of earlier texts and the Qurʾān's role in clarifying their message.

When examining parallel stories like the golden calf or Solomon's reign, the differences between biblical and Qurʾānic accounts emerge not as contradictions but as thoughtful adaptations. The Qurʾān's narrative selectivity – whether omitting certain details or introducing new perspectives – reflects its distinctive revelatory purpose rather than evidence of textual corruption. Islamic scholars have cautiously suggested these variations might relate to historical transmission processes, while contemporary scholarship offers divergent readings: some (e.g. Nickel, Reynolds) view them as dynamic recontextualisations of shared traditions, whereas others (Adang 2006) see them as reflecting theological critiques of antecedent texts.

This study illuminates how the Qurʾān and Bible participate in an ongoing intertextual conversation that has shaped Islamic thought from its beginnings. Their relationship transcends simplistic corruption or preservation binaries, instead revealing a complex interplay of continuity and innovation. The profound connections between these texts – visible in their shared prophets, ethical teachings, and eschatological visions – suggest a common spiritual heritage that has been creatively adapted rather than fundamentally altered. Moving forward, this understanding opens new possibilities for interfaith engagement, where differences are appreciated as complementary perspectives within a unified Abrahamic tradition, and where each scripture's distinctive voice contributes to a richer understanding of divine revelation. Such an approach honours the integrity of both traditions while fostering meaningful dialogue between their adherents.

Acknowledgements

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