

**Cite this article:** Mohammadi Bakhtiari, Ardeshir. Madmoli, Maryam. (2026) Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah: An Analysis of Surah al-Nisā', Verse 46 and Surah Āli 'Imrān, Verse 78 with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior. Journal of Interreligious Studies on the Qur'an and the Bible. Vol-2, Issue-2, 295-317. <https://doi.org/10.22034/qb.2026.2075767.1056>

## Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah: An Analysis of Surah al-Nisā', Verse 46 and Surah Āli 'Imrān, Verse 78 with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior

Ardeshir Mohammadi Bakhtiari<sup>1</sup> , Maryam Madmoli<sup>2</sup> 

(Received: 25 October 2025 - Accepted: 24 April 2026)

### Abstract

Although many scholars have regarded verse 46 of Surah *al-Nisā'* and verse 78 of Surah *Āli 'Imrān* as among the Qur'anic passages indicating the textual corruption of the Torah, or even of both Testaments, a closer reading of these verses reveals that they refer more precisely and profoundly to the linguistic and intellectual practices of a group among the Jews. By employing wordplay and limited semantic shifts, they caused confusion and doubt among their audience while presenting their statements as though they were derived from the sacred text of the Torah. An examination of the key terms *Yalwūn* and *al-Kitāb*, along with reflection on the concepts of distortion and *al-Kalim* in lexical and Qur'anic sources, indicates that these verses primarily critique a form of linguistic trickery and limited semantic distortion rather than a literal and fundamental alteration of the sacred text itself. Historical and narrative analyses likewise confirm that the verses do not refer to an actual textual alteration of the

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Philosophy and Theology, College of Islamic Studies, Ahlul Bayt International University, Tehran, IRAN (**Corresponding Author**). [bakhtiari250@yahoo.com](mailto:bakhtiari250@yahoo.com)

2. Researcher, Department of Women Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Al-Mustafa Open University, Qom, IRAN. [Madmoli@wrc.ir](mailto:Madmoli@wrc.ir)

**Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah:****An Analysis of Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46 and Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78  
with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior**

Torah; rather, what occurred involved linguistic manipulation and semantic shifts intended to deceive or mock. Therefore, it is highly plausible that these verses do not constitute evidence for the textual corruption of the Torah. Instead, their principal concern is to warn against linguistic misuse rather than an actual and direct modification of the wording of the sacred text. Through a close analysis of the key vocabulary of these verses, supported by historical and narrative reports, this study seeks to demonstrate that these passages signify wordplay more than they serve as evidence of textual corruption.

**Keywords:** The Holy Qur'an, Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46; Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78, Linguistic Behavior, Distortion, Torah, Jews.

**Introduction**

Belief in the corruption of sacred scriptures, particularly the Torah, has been one of the enduring and influential discussions in the history of Islamic thought and has been widely reflected in works of Qur'anic exegesis, theology, and Islamic historiography. The notion that the Torah underwent both textual and semantic alterations has long been prevalent among many Muslims and has been regarded as one of the major points of distinction among religious perspectives. Qur'anic verses, especially verse 46 of Surah *al-Nisā'* and verse 78 of Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, have historically been cited as Qur'anic evidence supporting this view.

However, the interpretations offered for these verses, often based on a limited understanding of key vocabulary and a neglect of linguistic and conceptual subtleties, have led to superficial and sometimes inaccurate conclusions.

The historical belief that the Torah underwent textual corruption has not only shaped the internal exegetical and theological discourse of Muslims but has also become one of the principal sources of division and tension among the Abrahamic religions. Careful analyses grounded in linguistics, Qur'anic studies, and historical-narrative investigation challenge this assumption and suggest that these verses primarily refer to forms of linguistic play and limited semantic modification practiced by certain individuals associated with the Jewish community. These linguistic and intellectual acts, intended to create confusion, doubt, and deception, do not amount to systematic or fundamental textual corruption of the sacred text.

Therefore, focusing exclusively on the concept of distortion as a direct alteration of wording presents an incomplete and inaccurate picture of the historical and intellectual reality of that period. Such an approach overlooks the important dimension of linguistic, cultural, and social interactions that play a crucial role in understanding sacred texts and religious discourse. Moreover, the continuation of this interpretation in contemporary interreligious contexts has reinforced misunderstandings and unproductive confrontations, thereby hindering the development of constructive, peaceful, and respectful dialogue among Muslims, Jews, and followers of other religions.

Accordingly, the present study employs linguistic analysis, Qur'anic studies, and historical-narrative critique to reexamine conventional interpretations of the alleged textual corruption of the Torah. By closely analyzing the key concepts *Yalwūn*, *al-Kitāb*, *Distortion*, and *al-Kalim*, this research seeks not only to reconsider prevailing assumptions but also to propose an analytical and scholarly framework that may contribute to reducing intellectual and

**Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah:****An Analysis of Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46 and Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78  
with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior**

cultural divisions among followers of the Abrahamic religions. By emphasizing scholarly precision and balanced expression, this approach aims to foster dialogue grounded in mutual understanding and respect for a shared religious heritage.

**1. Literature Review**

Although Qur'anic commentators and scholars have conducted extensive studies on the issue of the corruption of the two Testaments from a Qur'anic perspective, independent and detailed examinations of verses 46 of Surah *al-Nisā'* and 78 of Surah *Āli 'Imrān* specifically in relation to the question of the textual corruption of the Torah have received comparatively little attention in academic and religious scholarship. Most related studies address the topic within broader discussions of the corruption of sacred texts (Sayyah Gorji et al., 2021 AD/1400 SH: 75), or they appear sporadically and implicitly within wider theological (Sabzevari, 2004 AD/1383 SH: 200), exegetical (Māwirdī, n.d.: 1, 493), or even ethical discussions (Mesbah Yazdi, 2010 AD/1389 SH: 302).

However, these treatments rarely provide a focused and analytical examination of the key vocabulary and the linguistic and historical contexts of these verses. This scholarly gap has allowed inaccurate assumptions and superficial interpretations concerning the nature of distortion in these verses to spread, while deeper and more precise insights have received comparatively little attention.

Accordingly, the principal innovation and significance of this study lie in its specific focus on these two key verses and in its precise, interdisciplinary approach to analyzing fundamental lexical concepts such as *Yalwūn*, *al-Kitāb*, *Distortion*, and *al-Kalim*. Relying on a close analysis of the key vocabulary in these verses, and adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that brings together Qur'anic exegesis, linguistics, and Qur'anic theology, the present research seeks to uncover, from within the sacred text itself, the reality of Jewish linguistic behavior as represented by the Qur'an: "A form of behavior in which language does not function as a vehicle of meaning but rather as its veil. Through this approach, the study moves from exegetical presuppositions back to the text itself; from repetition to reflection; and from historical narration to a theological understanding of the language of revelation. The aim of this research is to arrive at a well-argued and well-documented understanding of the conceptual and linguistic reality of these verses, thereby reassessing the historically prevalent interpretations concerning the textual corruption of the Torah and directing future research toward deeper and more rigorous scholarly analyses. This approach not only fills an existing academic gap but also contributes significantly to strengthening interreligious dialogue and correcting widespread misconceptions."

## **2. From Presuppositions to the Text**

Before beginning the linguistic and exegetical analysis of these verses, it is necessary to move beyond the common historical and theological presuppositions surrounding the "Corruption of the Torah" and to engage the Qur'anic text directly. Although these two verses constitute only part of the broader set of passages that have historically been cited in Islamic exegesis

**Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah:****An Analysis of Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46 and Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78  
with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior**

as potential evidence for the corruption of earlier scriptures, careful attention to their linguistic and theological structure reveals that the Qur'an in these verses speaks not of a material or textual alteration of the sacred text, but rather of a deviation in intention, language, and meaning, a deviation manifested in the discursive and linguistic practices of the People of the Book.

**2.1. Linguistic Deception**

In verse 78 of Surah *Āli 'Imrān*,<sup>1</sup> God Almighty describes the Jews' linguistic deception as follows:

"And indeed, among them is a group who twist their tongues with the Book so that you may think it is from the Book, while it is not from the Book; and they say, "It is from God," while it is not from God; and they knowingly speak falsehood against God."

Although, within the immediate textual context of the preceding and following verses, there is no explicit and unequivocal indication identifying the precise identity of this group, Muslim Qur'anic scholars have reached a general consensus that the verse refers to individuals associated with Judaism. Some exegetes from early periods held that this verse indicates that this group of Jews engaged in the verbal corruption of the Torah (Abū 'Ubayda, 1961 AD/1381 AH: 1, 97; Ibn Jawzī, 2001 AD/1422 AH: 1, 297). Others, however, have regarded any claim of textual corruption extending beyond semantic distortion as incompatible with the import of the verse itself (Māturīdī, 2005 AD/1426 AH: 3, 198).

---

<sup>1</sup> The eighty-ninth surah revealed in Medina.

Deriving the notion of textual corruption from this verse is contingent upon a precise investigation of two foundational terms:

- First, *al-Kitāb*, which appears in the verse;
- Second, *Yalwūn*, which shapes the core meaning and semantic axis of the passage.

While there is general agreement among Muslim scholars that the second and third occurrences of *al-Kitāb* refer explicitly to the Torah, the identity of the **first** *al-Kitāb* remains a matter of scholarly debate. Some exegetes have argued that the first *al-Kitāb* does not refer to the Torah but rather to writings composed by the People of the Book themselves (Miybudī, 1992 AD/1371 SH: 2, 172; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 2011 AD/1390 SH: 3, 266; Javadi Amoli, 2010 AD/1389 SH: 14, 650).

On the basis of this interpretation, and with particular attention to the term *Yalwūn*, derived from *layy* rooted in *Ḥayy*, meaning to bend or twist a rope (Ṭūsī, n.d.: 2, 508; Rāghib Iṣfahānī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 752), and here signifying the twisting and contortion of the tongue in such a way that a word is no longer heard in its original form or meaning (Zamakhsharī, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 1, 377), it follows that a group of Jews, while reciting certain self-authored texts, manipulated their speech so that the listener would assume that passages from the Torah itself were being recited with its authentic tone and cadence.

They furthermore claimed that what they were reciting had been sent down by God Himself. Such conduct does not indicate textual corruption, but rather reflects clear linguistic manipulation and deliberate verbal trickery intended to deceive their audience.

**Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah:****An Analysis of Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46 and Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78  
with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior**

Opposite this group, many other exegetes considered the First occurrence of *al-Kitāb* to refer to the Torah, so much so that some deemed this interpretation a longstanding consensus among Muslims (Abūl Futūḥ Rāzī, 1987 AD/1408 AH: 4, 400). But even granting this interpretation, can textual corruption of the Torah be inferred? Although the detailed examination previously presented shows that even if *al-Kitāb* is taken to refer to the Torah, one still cannot derive a firm indication of textual corruption from this verse; it is worthwhile to further clarify why the appeal of proponents of textual distortion to this Qur'anic passage is unfounded. The key to understanding the flaw in this claim lies in the term *Yalwūn*. A precise consideration of this word, whose meaning we established earlier, reveals that there is no correspondence between the actions attributed to this group of Jews and the claim of textual corruption. When reciting certain passages and key terms of the Torah, they twisted their tongues in such a way that the listener heard a meaning different from that of the original word, even though the passage in question had a different and more authentic meaning. Whether those passages pertained to the qualities of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), or to the figure of the *Dajjāl* (Dīnawarī, 2003 AD/1424 AH: 1, 113), or to other terms that conflicted with their aims and designs, the outcome remains the same: their act was nothing more than a dangerous and misleading linguistic game.

It is noteworthy that even if one accepts the hypothesis of *Qaffāl* (d. 365 AH), namely, that the expression "*Yalwūna Alsinatahum bil Kitāb*" indicates the manipulation of the vocalization or declension of Torah words during recitation in order to alter their meaning (Fakhr Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 8,

268), the verse still bears no direct relevance to the concept of textual or even semantic corruption of the Torah. This is because the group in question merely altered their pronunciation during recitation, and did not modify the original written text of the Torah in any way.

On the other hand, some Qur'anic scholars have suggested a different perspective, arguing that the verse refers to complex linguistic and intellectual maneuvers practiced by certain Jews. Through raising multiple angles, opening interpretive possibilities, and posing various questions about the verses, they cast the listener's mind into doubt and confusion, preventing them from reaching the truth (Fakhr Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 8, 268). Although these methods cannot be described as mere linguistic games, even such an interpretation does not support an argument for textual corruption.

## 2.2. Linguistic Alteration

Concerning the linguistic manipulation carried out by some Jews, verse 46 of Surah *al-Nisā'*<sup>1</sup> states:

"Among the Jews are those who distort words from their proper places, and they say, "We hear and disobey," and "Hear, may you not be made to hear!" and "*Rā'inā*," twisting their tongues and slandering the religion. If they had said, "We hear and obey," or "Listen," and "Consider us," it would have been better and more upright for them. But God has cursed them because of their disbelief, and so they believe only a little."

Based on this verse, it appears that a group of Jews manipulated certain expressions that were exchanged in conversation between the Muslims and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), producing inappropriate or distorted meanings from them and using those expressions to mock the Muslims. With

<sup>1</sup>. The ninety-second surah revealed in Medina.

**Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah:****An Analysis of Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46 and Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78  
with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior**

regard to the interpretation of this verse and its relationship to the concept of distortion, there is no clear consensus among Muslim exegetes and scholars. Some remained silent and offered no comment on the matter (Nīshābūrī, 1994 AD/1415 AH: 1, 242; Yaḥyā ibn Sallām, 2005 AD/1425 AH: 1, 139). Others suggested that both textual and semantic distortion might be intended (Māturīdī, 2006 AD/1426 AH: 3, 198; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 2011 AD/1390 SH: 4, 364). Many regarded the verse as evidence of semantic distortion (Ṭūsī, n.d.: 3, 213; Fakhr Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 10, 93; Khū'ī, 2010 AD/1430 AH: 197; Ma'rifat, 2007 AD/1386 SH: 18; Javadi Amoli, 2010 AD/1389 SH: 22, 467; Ja'fariyan, 1992 AD/1413 AH: 10), while many others interpreted it as referring to verbal distortion (Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 1, 376; Abū 'Ubayda, 1961 AD/1381 AH: 1, 129; Yazīdī, 1984 AD/1405 AH: 1, 119; Ṭabrisī, 1952 AD/1372 AH: 3, 85; Ras'anī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 1, 525; Husseini Tehrani, 2005 AD/1426 AH: 10, 47).

In any linguistic text, understanding propositions and sentences fundamentally depends upon correctly grasping the individual words and key vocabulary within it. Therefore, in order to uncover the true meaning and primary intention of the verse under discussion, one must turn to its linguistic components and analyze them with particular precision. Among these, the three central expressions "*Yuḥarrifūn*," "*al-Kalim*," and "*Layyan bi Alsinatihim*" play a decisive role in shaping the meaning and guiding the reader's understanding of the concept of distortion. A careful examination of these terms is not only the key to understanding the verse but also decisive in determining whether it refers to textual distortion or semantic distortion.

Accordingly, the starting point of any precise exegetical analysis must be reflection on these linguistic elements and their usage within the context of the verse.

Lexicographers have defined the word distortion as diverting something from its original path and inclining it toward the sides (Zamakhsharī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 1, 239; Ibn Athīr Jazarī, 1947 AD/1367 AH: 1, 369). This meaning is also employed in verses such as Qur'an 8:16, indicating that the semantic load of distortion points less to a change in wording and more to a deviation in meaning or usage. Indeed, linguists not only fail to see any connection between this word and textual alteration, but explicitly associate it with the notion of semantic distortion (Azharī, n.d.: 5, 12; Ibn 'Abbād, 1997 AD/1414 AH: 3, 82). They do not place any of the three principal roots of this word within the domain of textual corruption. Rather, one of these roots is interpreted in line with the meaning of conceptual distortion, and the verse "*Yuḥarrifūna al-Kalima 'an Mawāḍi'ihī*" is explained within this very sense (Ibn Fāris, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 2, 43). In the view of Rāghib Iṣfahānī, directing a word toward a meaning other than its apparent and conventional sense constitutes distortion, and he considers this interpretation the most preferable among the various meanings (Rāghib Iṣfahānī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 228, 725).

Supporting this semantic understanding, a number of lexicographers have argued that distortion in the Qur'an refers to altering the meaning of letters and words, just as the Jews engaged in such behavior with respect to the meanings of the Torah. The Qur'an itself refers to them with expressions such as "*Yuḥarrifūnahū*" and "*Yuḥarrifūna al-Kalima 'an Mawāḍi'ihī*." (Ibn Manzūr, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 9, 43; Zabīdī, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 12, 136) In

**Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah:****An Analysis of Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46 and Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78  
with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior**

the contemporary period, some scholars who have examined the views of earlier linguists have explicitly stated that distortion does not mean replacing one word with another, since in Arabic such changes are expressed by terms like substitution and alteration. Drawing upon detailed analyses of earlier scholars, this researcher concludes that distortion refers to manipulation of the meanings of words and their improper application within the context of verses, rather than a direct alteration of their verbal structure (Muṣṭafawī, 1989 AD/1368 SH: 2, 199).

From another perspective, if distortion in the verse were intended to mean a change in the wording of the Torah, an important question arises: 'Why did the Qur'an not employ clearer terms that are normally used in Arabic to denote textual alteration?' For instance, the word "*Yubaddilūn*," which in Arabic means removing one word and replacing it with another, was commonly used by Arabs precisely in this sense (Ibn Fāris, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 1, 210; Azdi, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 1, 104). Likewise, the term substitution is also recognized as meaning alteration or substitution of words (Rāghib Iṣfahānī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 619; Ibn Manẓūr, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 5, 40).

This point can also be observed in Qur'anic verses where the term "*Baddala*" is used to describe a change in words committed by the Israelites, which clearly represents a case of textual alteration. This matter is explicitly stated in Surah *al-Baqarah*, verses 58-59.<sup>1</sup> According to these verses, when the

---

<sup>1</sup> Very close to the wording of *Surah al-Baqarah* is what appears in *Surah al-A'raf*, where it states:

Children of Israel arrived at Jerusalem, God commanded them to seek forgiveness and then enter the city; however, instead of obeying, they altered the words and distorted their meaning. The verses read:

"And when We said: "Enter this town and eat freely from it wherever you wish; enter the gate prostrating and say: "*Hittah* (forgiveness), so that We may forgive your sins and increase the reward of those who do good; but those who did wrong changed the word that had been said to them into something else; so We sent down upon those who did wrong a punishment from heaven because of their transgression."

The word that Yahweh had commanded them to use for seeking forgiveness was *Hittah*, or perhaps any other word with a similar meaning (Zamakhsharī, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 1, 143). But they instead used another word with a different meaning. Although the Qur'an does not report the substituted word, most Qur'anic scholars (Fakhr Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 3, 525) have identified it as *Hintah* (wheat), or *Hintah fī Sha'ir* (wheat mixed with barley), or *Hittā Samaqāthā* (red wheat) ('Askarī, 1988 AD/1409 AH: 260; Jaṣṣās, 1984 AD/1405 AH: 1, 40; Miybudī, 1992 AD/1371 SH: 1, 204).

Based on what has been explained, it seems that had the Almighty intended to refer explicitly and unambiguously to an alteration and substitution of words in the Torah, it would have been appropriate to employ vocabulary that in Arabic is well-known and commonly used to denote such a concept, terms that clearly and without ambiguity signify verbal change and replacement.

---

"And [remember] when it was said to them, "Dwell in this town and eat from it wherever you wish, and say, "Relieve us (*hittah*)," and enter the gate in prostration; We will forgive your sins and will increase the doers of good. (161) But those among them who did wrong substituted a word other than that which had been said to them, so We sent down upon them a punishment from the heaven because they were wrongdoing." (162)

**Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah:****An Analysis of Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46 and Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78  
with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior**

Such precise and explicit wording would not only reflect divine wisdom and precision in conveying the message of distortion in a clear and unmistakable manner, but would also prevent misunderstandings and misinterpretations and add strength and certainty to the divine evidence.

Now that it has been established that the term distortion in this verse does not signify textual modification of the scripture, but rather points primarily to semantic distortion, it is time to carefully analyze the other linguistic components of the verse. This will clarify that even if one were to interpret distortion solely in a textual sense, this verse still cannot serve as strong evidence for the textual corruption of the Torah. Consequently, it is necessary to examine closely the key term *al-Kalim*, upon which the correctness or incorrectness of many interpretations, particularly among proponents of the corruption of previous scriptures, depends. From a lexical standpoint, *al-Kalim* is the plural of *Kalimah*, originally meaning "Words" or "Utterances." But the crucial question here is: In this specific Qur'anic context, does it refer to the Torah, or something else? And does it encompass the whole of it, or only a particular part? Since it is clear that the Jews, even assuming distortion, did not alter all its words, it is necessary to determine precisely which referents of *al-Kalim* are intended in this linguistic context.

Some early exegetes, including *Mujāhid* (d. 102 AH), understood *al-Kalim* in this verse to refer to the Torah, and based on this interpretation, believed in textual distortion of the sacred scriptures (Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 5, 75; Abū Ḥātam, 1998 AD/1419 AH: 3, 965; Ibn Ḥamūsh, 2008 AD/1429 AH, 2: 1346). In contrast, a different view is transmitted from *Ibn 'Abbās* (d. 68 AH),

who held that *al-Kalim* refers not to the Torah but to the statements and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Dīnawarī, 2003 AD/1424 AH: 1, 154; Ṭabarānī, 2008: 2, 245; Tha‘labī, 2003 AD/1424 AH: 3, 323). This second interpretation also corresponds to some historical reports indicating that a group from the People of the Book, after hearing the Prophet’s words, altered them and changed their meanings. Given the lack of sufficient evidence to support *Mujāhid*’s interpretation and the stronger alignment of historical data with the view attributed to *Ibn ‘Abbās*, the latter approach appears to possess greater stability and analytical strength. According to *Nahhās*, the matter remains uncertain between these two interpretations (2000 AD/1421 AH: 1, 217), in which case the verse cannot be used decisively to extract the doctrine of textual corruption of the Torah.

Some researchers may argue that numerous reports outside this verse indicate the occurrence of distortion in the Torah, and may treat these as evidence supporting *Mujāhid*’s view. However, a close examination of the context of the verse demonstrates that it refers to a particular event and a limited act carried out by a specific group under defined circumstances, not to general textual corruption throughout the entirety of the Torah.

Accordingly, it is possible to distinguish between the reports that speak of a general distortion of the Torah and this verse, which addresses a specific and limited matter. On this basis, there is no contradiction between the two types of data, and the principal aim of the verse is not to establish textual corruption of the Jewish scripture; rather, it points to a particular kind of linguistic maneuver employed in their interaction with the Prophet of Islam.

Nevertheless, deeper reflection on the lexical structure of the verse opens a new horizon for interpreting its meaning, a horizon that suggests the

**Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah:****An Analysis of Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46 and Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78  
with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior**

possibility of a third and different interpretation. This interpretation not only stands as a rival to the previous two, but, on the basis of internal textual evidence, appears even more coherent. The source of this interpretive possibility lies in the verse's third key expression: "*Layyan bi Alsinatihim*," which denotes a deliberate twisting of the tongue, an act that was certainly not a mere linguistic quirk, but a discursive tool for constructing meaning and shifting semantic implications.

According to other Qur'anic verses, it becomes evident that a group from among the Jews, through linguistic trickery and twisting of words, caused various difficulties for the Muslims. A clear example of this behavior appears in Surah *Āli 'Imrān*: 78,<sup>1</sup> which reports that some of them recited texts other than the Torah using a tone and style similar to its recitation, thereby leading others to believe that those words were part of the sacred text, while they were not.

In the verse under discussion as well, the contextual indications show that such "Linguistic Twisting" was not limited merely to tone or recitation, but extended into the semantic realm of words. Some among them, by skillfully substituting Hebrew words with Arabic equivalents, or by manipulating intonation and communicative intent, diverted words that were commonly used between the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Muslims from their familiar and expected meanings, injecting into them connotations of mockery,

---

<sup>1</sup>. And indeed, among them is a group who twist their tongues with the Book so that you may think it is from the Book, while it is not from the Book. And they say, "It is from God," but it is not from God. And they speak lies against God knowingly.

disparagement, or insult. In other words, this form of distortion did not pertain to altering the written structure or content of sacred texts, but rather exemplified oral distortion and semantic play, occurring within the sphere of everyday linguistic interaction and interreligious communication.

Within this communicative setting, the Jews organized their linguistic distortion and wordplay primarily around three key expressions, examples of which are explicitly highlighted in Qur'anic verses and prophetic reports. In response to the Prophet's instructions, to which the Muslims replied, "*Sami 'nā wa Aṭa 'nā*" (we hear and obey), the Jews subtly but meaningfully altered the phrase by replacing *Aṭa 'nā* with *'Aṣaynā*, a term indicating disobedience and rebellion, thereby completely overturning the sentence's meaning. Likewise, when the Muslims said to the Prophet, "*Usmi 'in*" (listen), the Jews used instead the expression "*'Isma ' Ghayra Masma 'in*," meaning "Listen, but hear in a way that renders you deaf," a sarcastic and offensive phrase intended to ridicule and belittle its addressee. Similarly, the Muslims would say to the Prophet, "*Rā 'inā*" (grant us consideration/give us time), but the Jews twisted their tongues when uttering this word, producing a form that carried derisive implications. Some interpreted *Rā 'inā* in the Jewish usage as "Our Shepherd." (Fakhr Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 3, 635) Others, through examining earlier Hebrew writings and the current Torah and Gospel, understood *Rā 'inā* to mean "Our wicked one" or "Our evildoer." (Balāghī, n.d.: 1, 114) Still others believed that the Jews, through phonetic manipulation, derived it from the root *Ra 'ūnah*, meaning "Foolishness," turning *Rā 'inā* into the sense of "Make us foolish!" (Makarem Shirazi, 1992 AD/1371 SH: 1, 384)

**Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah:****An Analysis of Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46 and Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78  
with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior**

Thus, it can be understood that *al-Kalim* in the verse refers to the commonly used expressions exchanged between the Prophet (PBUH) and his followers; and the verse, by citing these three illustrative cases, clarifies the method and scope of the linguistic and semantic distortions employed by certain Jews. Based on the syntactic structure of the verse, the presence of the *Wāw* between the phrases "*Mawāḍi'ihī*" and "*Yaḳūlūna*" indicates a relationship of explanation and clarification between the two, meaning that *al-Kalim* refers precisely to those expressions that were not restored to their proper semantic place, but were instead articulated and interpreted by the Jews in a manner that diverted them from their original meanings. This interpretation has also been regarded as correct and plausible by several prominent exegetes (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 2011 AD/1390 SH: 4, 365).

It is noteworthy that God, in verse 104 of Surah *al-Baqarah*,<sup>1</sup> likewise refers to this same pattern of linguistic conduct and verbal play among some Jews. When these two verses are considered together, two key points may be inferred. First, given that Surah *al-Baqarah* was revealed several years before Surah *al-Nisā'*, while both were revealed in Medina, it can be concluded that this behavior on the part of some Jews of Medina continued for several years. No report of such conduct exists from the period of the Prophet's presence in Mecca. The second point, which is even more instructive, is that the scope of these linguistic games and distortions appears to have been confined to a few

---

<sup>1</sup>. "O! You who believe, do not say *Rā'inā*, but say *Unḏurnā*, and listen; and for the disbelievers there is a painful punishment."

specific and limited expressions. Had this practice been more widespread, had the Jews applied this approach to other words related to the Prophet (PBUH) and his teachings, the Qur'an would presumably have referred to them as well. In particular, if such linguistic distortions had targeted terms directly associated with the person, qualities, and distinguished characteristics of the Noble Prophet (PBUH), it is highly probable that the Wise Lord would have cited more striking examples in the Qur'anic verses as warnings and lessons, thereby offering a more comprehensive and profound admonition regarding this linguistic and social problem.

From the perspective of Shi'i hadith literature, it is also possible to gain a more precise understanding of the term *al-Kalim*, which helps clarify this discussion. In the single report that has reached us on this matter, Imam 'Askarī, in his commentary on verse 104 of Surah *al-Baqarah*, narrates from Imam *Kāzīm* the reason for the revelation of verse 46 of Surah *al-Nisā*'. According to this report, *al-Kalim* does not refer to the words of the Torah, nor even to the speech of the Prophet (PBUH); rather, it refers to the statements of certain Jews who, by employing Hebrew expressions and speaking in a manner similar to the everyday language used by Muslims in addressing the Prophet (PBUH), nevertheless distorted those words and turned them into objects of mockery ('Askarī, 1978 AD/1409 AH: 478). Thus, the Shi'i narration clearly indicates that the verse aims to criticize a form of linguistic play and manipulation within ordinary conversation, rather than the alteration of sacred texts or revealed speech. This approach, in addition to aligning with lexical and historical analyses, underscores the importance of precise and specialized interpretation of religious texts and demonstrates that

**Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah:****An Analysis of Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46 and Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78  
with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior**

superficial or stereotypical readings of Qur'anic concepts can lead to fundamental errors in theological and juridical discussions.

From the sum of analyses and evidence gathered regarding this verse, the final conclusion is that it provides no proof of the textual corruption of the Torah and, even from the standpoint of semantic distortion, offers no reliable evidence. Put more plainly, the verse does not appear to grant any basis for claiming distortion in earlier sacred scriptures or in the words of the Prophet (PBUH). Such a conclusion not only calls for careful reflection on the exegetical traditions of both Sunni and Shi'i scholarship, but also highlights the need for a critical reassessment of prevailing approaches to the issue of distortion. Accordingly, verse 46 of Surah *al-Nisā'* should be understood within the framework of linguistic critique and the social challenges of that period, rather than being used as evidence to support broad claims regarding alteration or corruption of sacred texts.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study demonstrate that verses 46 of Surah *al-Nisā'* and 78 of Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, contrary to the common assumption among some exegetes, do not indicate textual corruption of the Torah. A careful examination of the vocabulary, context, and historical setting of these verses reveals that the Qur'anic critique is directed not at the authors of sacred texts but at speakers who employ language as a tool for deception, humiliation, and the distortion of meaning. Accordingly, these two verses should be interpreted within the theological framework of the ethics of religious speech, rather than

within the domain of the history of textual corruption; for in this context the Qur'an is concerned less with the text itself than with the intention, tone, and purposes of the speaker.

Such an approach offers a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and revelation in the Qur'an and opens the way for renewed reflection on relations among the Abrahamic religions. From this perspective, the Qur'an calls us not to historical judgment about corruption, but to vigilance regarding the honesty of language when attributing words to God, a call that remains alive and meaningful for the contemporary world, both theologically and ethically.

### References

- Abū al-Futūḥ al-Rāzī, Ḥ. (1987 AD/1408 AH). *Rawḍ al-Jinān wa Rūḥ al-Jinān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān*. (M. M. Nasih; M. J. Yahaqi, Eds.). Mashhad: Astan Quds Razavi.
- Abū Ḥātam, A. (1998 AD/1419 AH). *Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*. (A. M. Ṭayyib, Ed.). Riyadh: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bāz.
- Abū 'Ubaydah, M. (1961 AD/1381 AH). *Majāz al-Qur'ān*. (F. Sezgin, Ed.). Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī.
- 'Askarī, H. (1409 AH). *al-tafṣīr al-Mansūb ilā al-Ḥasan ibn 'Alī al-'Askarī*. Qom: Madrasat al-Imām al-Mahdī.
- Azharī, M. (n.d.). *Tahdhīb al-Lughah*. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī.
- Balāghī, M. J. (n.d.). *Ālā' al-Raḥmān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān*. Qom: Ma'rifat Foundation, Islamic Research Unit.
- Dīnawarī, A. (2003 AD/1424 AH). *Tafṣīr Ibn Wahb*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.
- Hosseini Tehrani, M. (2005 AD/1426 AH). *Imamology*. 3rd Ed. Mashhad: Allamah Ṭabāṭabā'ī Foundation.
- Ibn Athīr Jazarī, M. (1988 AD/1367 SH). *al-Nihāyah fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth wa al-Athar*. (M. M. Tanahi, Ed.) 4th Ed. Qom: Mu'assasat Ismā'īliyyān.
- Ibn Fāris, A. (1983 AD/1404 AH). *Mu'jam Maqāyīs al-Lughah*. (A. Harun, Ed.). Qom: Maktab al-'Ilām al-Islāmī.

**Wordplay or the Distortion of the Torah:****An Analysis of Surah *al-Nisā'*, Verse 46 and Surah *Āli 'Imrān*, Verse 78  
with an Emphasis on Jewish Linguistic Behavior**

- Ibn Ḥammūsh, M. (2008 AD/1429 AH). *al-Hidāyah ilā Bulūgh al-Nihāyah*. Sharjah: University of Sharjah.
- Ibn Jawzī, A. (2001 AD/1422 AH). *Zād al-Masīr fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr*. (A. M. Mahdi, Ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī.
- Ibn Manzūr, M. (1993 AD/1414 AH). *Lisān al-'Arab*. (J. Mirdamadi, Ed.) 3rd Ed. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.
- Ja'farian, R. (1992 AD/1413 AH). *Akdhūbat Distortion al-Qur'ān bayna al-Shī'ah wa al-Sunnah*. Tehran: Office of the Supreme Leader in Hajj Affairs.
- Jaṣṣāṣ, A. (1405 AH). *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*. (M. S. Qamhawi, Ed.). Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī.
- Javadi Amoli, A. (2007 AD/1386 SH). *The Source of Thought*. 5th Ed. Qom: Isra Institute.
- Javadi Amoli, A. (2010 AD/1389 SH). *Tafsīr Tasnīm*. (H. Waezi Muhammadi, Ed.) 8th Ed. Qom: Isra Institute.
- Makarem Shirazi, N. (1992 AD/1371 SH). *Tafsir Nemooneh*. 10th Ed. Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah.
- Ma'rifah, M. (2007 AD/1386 SH). *Qur'ān Sciences (Tamhīd)*. 8th Ed. Qom: Tamhid.
- Māturīdī, M. (2005 AD/1426 AH). *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.
- Māwirdī, A. (n.d.). *al-Nukat wa al-'Uyūn*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.
- Maybudī, A. (1992 AD/1371 SH). *Kashf al-Asrār wa 'Uddat al-Abrār*. 5th Ed. Tehran: Amir Kabir.
- Mesbah Yazdi, M. T. (2010 AD/1389 SH). *Comments in the Qur'ān*. 2nd Ed. Qom: Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Institute.
- Muqātil ibn Sulaymān. (2002 AD/1423 AH). *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*. (A. M. Shahata, Ed.). Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī.
- Muṣṭafawī, Ḥ. (1989 AD/1368 SH). *al-Taḥqīq fī Kalimāt al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*. Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.
- Naḥās, A. (2000 AD/1421 AH). *I'rāb al-Qur'ān*. (A. Ibrāhīm, Annot.). Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.
- Nīshābūrī, M. (2004 AD/1425 AH). *Ījāz al-Bayān 'an Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*. (H. Qasemi, Ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī.

- Rāghib Iṣfahānī, H. (1991 AD/1412 AH). *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur'ān*. (S. A. Dawudī, Ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Shāmiyyah.
- Rāzī, F. (1999 AD/1420 AH). *Mafātiḥ al-Ghayb*. 3rd Ed. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī.
- Sabzevari, M. H. (2004 AD/1383 SH). *Hādī al-Muḍillīn*. (A. Awji, Ed.). Tehran: University of Tehran Press.
- Sayyah Gorgi, et al. (n.d.). Distortion of the Bible according to the Quran and the Bible. *Journal of Comparative Studies of Islamic Schools*. 55, 75-90.
- Ṭabarānī, S. (2008 AD). *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*. Irbid: Dār al-Kitāb al-Thaqāfī.
- Ṭabarī, M. (1991 AD/1412 AH). *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah.
- Ṭabāṭabā'ī, M. (1970 AD/1390 AH). *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. 2nd Ed. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'Alamī lil Maṭbū'āt.
- Ṭabrisī, F. (1993 AD/1372 SH). *Majma' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. (F. Yazdi Tabataba'ī; H. Rasouli, Eds.). Tehran: Naser Khusraw.
- Th'alabī, A. (2001 AD/1422 AH). *Tafsīr al-Tha'labī*. (A. Ibn 'Āshūr, Ed.). Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī.
- Ṭūsī, M. (n.d.). *al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. (A. H. al-Amili, Ed.). Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī.
- Yazīdī, A. (1984 AD/1405 AH). *Gharīb al-Qur'ān wa Tafsīruhu*. (M. S. al-Ḥājj, Ed.). Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub.
- Zabīdī, M. (1993 AD/1414 AH). *Tāj al-'Arūs min Jawāhir al-Qāmūs*. (H. Ali; A. Siri, Eds.). Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.
- Zamakhsharī, M. (1986 AD/1407 AH). *al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl*. (M. A. Husayn, Ed.) 3rd Ed. Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī.
- Zamakhsharī, M. (1996 AD/1417 AH). *al-Fā'iq fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*. (I. Shams al-Dīn, Ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.
- Zuhrī, M. (n.d.). *Tahdhīb al-Lughah*. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī.