Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s attitude towards Biblical Scriptures as reflected in his work Tabyīn al-Kalām Fī Tafsīr al-Taurāt wa al-Injīl ʿalā millat al-Īslām

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ABSTRACT
Tabyīn al-Kalām Fī Tafsīr al-Taurāt wa al-Injīl ʿalā millat al-Īslām is one of the most important works written by the Indian Muslim Scholar Sayyid Ahmad Khan. This book is his exploration of Judaeo-Christian scripture in responding to the challenge made by Christian missionarises and western orientalists in India for Muslims to study the Bible and the early Christian Churches. It has three volumes: covering several topics of discussion such as “On the necessity of the Coming of prophets to save mankind”, what is Revelation and word of God?”, and others. It also discusses several questions related to the Old and New Testaments.

ABSTRAK

INTRODUCTION
Tabyīn al-Kalām Fī Tafsīr al-Taurāt wa al-Injīl ʿalā millat al-Īslām or The Mohamedan Commentary on the Holy Bible as they are translated in English, (Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 1887) are among the important works written by a Muslim as commentary on the Biblical scriptures. The importance of Tabyīn al-Kalām, especially in an Indian context, is not
that they are the first works ever published in India related to the commentary of Judaeo-Christian scriptures. Before the religious debate of Easter 1854 took place in Agra between the Muslim 'ulama' represented by Rahmat Allah Karranawi and Wazir Khan and Christian missionaries led by Pfander and T.V. French, Rahmat Allah had published a number of works on Biblical subjects. Among them are T'jaz-i 'Isawi al-M'ulaqqab bih misqalah-i tahrif, Izalat al-aham meaning 'Removal of Doubts' and Ibtil-i-tathfile meaning 'Invalidation of the Trinity'. All these works were published before 1854. (Christian W. Troll 1978, 68-69). But the importance of Tabyin al-Kalâm comes from its author; Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. He was a controversial figure in India. His works on Islam and Biblical scriptures as well as his interpretation of Jesus attracted many people to study them. As a result, religious polemics arose between them. For example, some of his religious views on Islamic teachings were criticised by some Muslim scholars in India such as Mohshin al-Mulk and Maulwi Haji Ali Bakhsh Khan Sahab Bahadur. However, his religious exploration of Judaeo-Christian scriptures did not directly bring him into a theological conflict between him and Christian missionaries in India.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan wrote his three Volumes of Tabyin al-Kalâm in order to respond positively to the call made by two Christian evangelists, Pfander and William Muir “for a Muslim historical study of the Bible and the early Church” (Troll 1978, 70).

There is no doubt that Sayyid Ahmad Khan followed a religious debate that took place between Pfander and Rahmat Allah Karranawi. He also was fully aware of the publication of William Muir’s books that touched the controversy between Muslim ‘ulama’ and Christians missionaries. Muir directly involved himself in that controversy by publishing several works that related to it.

Along with other Christian missionaries who were working in India at that time such as Pfander, William Muir also had a great interest in the study of Islam. He was not a missionary like Pfander, but his interest in religious writing enabled him to publish several works in this field.

On 1845, Muir’s article entitled “The Mohammedan controversy” was published in the Calcutta Review (Muir 1897, 1-63). This was followed by his Urdu work on Church History called Masih-i Kalisa Ki Tarikh (The History of the Christian Church), published in 1848. (Troll 1978, 67). Another tract by him on Islam called “Sources for Biography of Mahomet” was also published in the Calcutta Review in 1853. In 1854, his Urdu work called Din Ki Tariq meaning The Path of Religion appeared. He also published in 1855 another work entitled The Testimony borne by the Koran to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Rahmat Allah, Pfander and Muir published their works on this subject. Sayyid Ahmad
Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s

Khan also began to explore his writing on Biblical scriptures. Accordingly, three volumes of Tabyin al-Kalâm appeared. He had his own interpretation of the position of Christ, his birth, miracles and death.

In the first volume of Tabyin al-Kalâm, Sayyid Ahmad Khan discusses several topics including “on the necessity of the coming of prophets to save mankind”; (first discourse), “What is Revelation and Word of God?”; (second discourse), “What books are those which in the Koran [Qur’an] are alluded to under the name of Toureit [Torah], Soohoof Umbiya [Unbiya], Zuboor [Zabur], and Injeel?”; (third discourse), “What faith have Mohomedans [muslims] in the Toureit (Pentateuch), Zuboor (Psalms), Soohoof Umbiya (The Books of Prophets), and Injeel (The Gospels)?”; (fourth discourse), “What was the number of the books descended from God to prophets, and are they all included in the Bible?”; (fifth discourse), “What are the methods applied by the Mohomedan religion [Islam] to inquiere into, and confirm the authenticity of a religious book?”; (sixth discourse), “What is the opinion entertained by the Mohomedans regarding to corruption of the sacred scriptures?”; (seventh discourse), “Are the books which compose the Bible identical with the original writings of the inspired writers?”; (eighth discourse), “What belief have Mohomedans in the versions of the sacred scriptures?”; (ninth discourse), and “What is meant according to the Mohomedan faith, by one commandment of God cancelling another or being cancelled by another?”; (tenth discourse).

In the same volume, Sayyid Ahmad Khan also mentions “the dates of the principal events recorded in the Bible” and “the correspondence between the Hijree [Hijrah] and Christian eras” (Sayyid Ahmed 1887, 1. n.p.).

In the second volume of Tabyin al-Kalâm he discusses several questions that relate to the Old Testament. Certain events which have been narrated in the Old Testament such as the position of Adam and the Satan and the Deluge of Noah are discussed by him.

What is interesting in this volume is that when he discusses certain passages in Genesis, he also quotes some similar passages in the Qur’an that discuss the same subject. All verses in Genesis have been written in Hebrew with Urdu and English translations. Similary, verses from the Qur’an have been translated into Urdu and English. Sayyid Ahmad Khan was assisted by a Jewish scholar called Salim in his study of Hebrew verses in Genesis. But he managed to write his Biblical commentary on The Old Testament only on Genesis I – XI. It is not known why he was unable to finish his commentary on the Old Testament, or at least on Genesis. It is unlikely that it was loss of interest in the study of Biblical scriptures that made him stop his project of Biblical commentary. This may be proved later from what he published in the third volume of Tabyin al-Kalâm. Apart from his writing on “A Brief History of the
Christian Religion up to the coming of Muslim Religion”, in this volume, the main focus is concentrated on the commentary of the Gospel of Matthew. It would be good if Sayyid Ahmad Khan had been able to write his Biblical commentary on four Gospels rather than only on the Gospel of Matthew. It is not known also why he did not continue his Biblical exploration of the Gospels. What is clear is that after finishing the third volume of this Tabyin al-Kalam, he was fully occupied with other activities.

In his first discourse “on the necessity of the coming of Prophets to save mankind (إنسان كي وجات ك فهي ضرور) Sayyid Ahmad Khan emphasizes the necessity of revelation from God to mankind.

According to him, the necessity of the coming of the Prophets is for two reasons:

to tell us by revelation (ilham) [wahyu] who and what our Master is. And that we must walk according to His will, so that in this way we may reach our fundamental, imperishable truth, i.e. eternal life. (Sayyid Ahmad Khan 1887, 13)

At this stage we see him acknowledging the limited role played by reason in knowing God. He says that by reason only man is unable to know his Master. Therefore, God sent prophets to mankind in order to make known His existence. He argues that if God did not send prophets to mankind, how can He bring upon man the sin of unbelief? In other words, God sent prophets to human beings in order to convey the message and commandments of God to them. They told them to believe and worship Him. If they still do not believe and obey His commandments through the message brought by His prophets, then, it is their own fault. Sayyid Ahmad Khan thus concludes that there is no doubt prophets were sent by God to all children of the human race. Through them, God’s unity and His will were made known. Then, gradually men deprived the message of God. Basing himself on Sūrat al-Shūra in the Qur’an, verse 13, Sayyid Ahmad Khan is of the opinion that all the prophets came with the same message preaching to the people to believe in the unity of God. He alone is to be worshipped. The Qur’an says:

شِرْعُ لَكُمْ مِنَ الْدِّينِ مَا وَصِيَّ بِهِ نُوحًا وَالَّذِي اَوْحَيْنَا الْبِلََكَ وَمَا وَصِيَّنَا بِإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَى وَيَسَُّู وَهُمُّ الَّذِينَ اِبْصَرَوا الْدِّينَ وَلَوْ تَفَرَّقوَا.
Meaning:
The same religion has He established for you as that which he enjoined on Noah — The which We have sent by inspiration [by Revelation] to thee — and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: namely, that ye should remain steadfast in Religion [Al-Din], and make no divisions therein... (Surah al-Shura, 13)

According to Sayyid Ahmad Khan again, God revealed different Shari‘at “that is the prescriptions regarding the service of the One God and the way He should be worshipped” to different prophets (Sayyid Ahmad Khan, I 4), who lived in different ages. In a wider context, this statement can be analysed to mean that every prophet and messenger of God brought the same aqida that is calling people to believe in the Oneness of God. But since they live in different ages, cultures and traditions, therefore they had different Shari‘ah. The Qur’an says:

( لكل جعلنا منكم شريعة ومنهاجا)

Meaning:
to each among you have We prescribed a Law [Shari‘at] and an Open Way.

Relating to this, Sayyid Ahmad Khan mentions that the teaching brought by all the prophets is the same: acknowledging the One God, worshipping and serving Him. Thousands of prophets were sent at different times. When people corrupted the teaching of a prophet, another prophet was sent. “For this reason”, he says, “thousands of prophets came, brought their books with them and propagated the unity of God and His precepts among the people”. In his discourse “On the necessity of the coming of Prophets to save mankind”, Sayyid Ahmad Khan also points out that the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the seal of the prophets (Khātim al-Nabīyin and the Lord Messiah (Christ) is the “Spirit of Allah” (Rūh Allah), the “Word of Allah” (Kalimat Allah), and the “Aided by the Holy Spirit” (mu‘ayyid bi-rūh al-quds) (Sayyid Ahmad Khan, I 5). He also says that all the sacred books revealed by God to His messengers are true such as Taurāt, Zabīr, Suhuf al-anbiyā, (the books of the prophets), Injil (Gospels) and the Qur’an. As other Muslims, he also believes that all prophets and angels of God are free from light and serious sin and they are dependent on God.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan is right when he mentions that God revealed His words not only to His prophets and messengers but also to those who were not prophets. For example, there are many places in the Qur’an, as quoted by him, where God revealed His words to non prophets. The Qur’an says:
وأوهينا إلى أم موسى إن أرضعه فإذا خفت فأتقيه في
اليه ولا تخافه ولا تحزني إنا رادوه اليك وجعلوهم من
المرسلين.

(al-Qisas, 28:7)
Meaning:
So We sent this inspiration [revelation] to the mother of Moses ‘Suckle (thy
child), but when thou hast fears about him, cast him into river, but fear not nor
grieve: for We shall restore him to thee, and We shall make him one of Our
apostles [messengers].

In the above passage, God conveyed His message to the mother of
Moses and she was not a prophetess. Similarly, according to the Qur’an,
God also revealed His words to the mother of Jesus, Maryam (Mary).
Gabriel (Jibril), the angel of Revelation conveyed God’s message to her
relating to the birth of Jesus.

In Surah al-Kahf (The cave) verse 86, God said to Zul Qarnain

قلنا ياذا القرين اما ان تعذب واما ان تتخذ فيهم حسنة

Meaning:
We said ‘O Zul-qarnain! (Thou hast authority), either to punish them, or to
 treat them with kindness.

All these Qur’anic verses prove that non prophets also received
revelation form God. But only messengers of God were given books by
Him which contain His orders.

In his discussion on “what books are those which in the Koran are
alluded to under the names of Touret, Sohoofumbiya, Zuboor, and
Injeel”, Sayyid Ahmad Khan says that the revelations received by the
prophets were no doubt the very words of God, Therefore, he adds,

the origin of the Touret, the Sohoofumbiya, the Zuboor, and the Injeel, is the
revelations which were conveyed from God to Moses, to the Israelitish prophets,
to David, and to Jesus respectively.

Those revelations are known as cited above when they were written
down. Sayyid Ahmad Khan is of the opinion that when the Qur’an
mentions about the Torah, the Suhuf Anbyya’ and the Zabur and the
Injil, it directly refers to the revelations that God revealed to the above
mentioned prophets. Those books, he says, “had obtained authority at
any time whatever”.

Like other Muslim scholars, Sayyid Ahmad Khan understands revelation as words of God revealed by Him to His prophets. Therefore, he differentiates between the revelation of God to Jesus which is known in Islamic theology as *Injil* and the acts of the apostles. He acknowledges the apostles of Christ as inspired men, and their writings, so true, holy and worthy of respect that they may be used as religious guides.

But since he holds the view that revelation consists of words which directly came from God to a prophet, therefore, he considers the writings of Christ's apostles as similar to that of the writings of the Prophet Muhammad's companions.

It is clear that the concept of revelation understood by Muslim is different from that of Christians theology. In Christian Theology there are two types of revelation: General and Special Revelation. According to Alan Richardson, general revelation is given to men everywhere and makes them truly human. Man, even Hindu man or communist man or pagan man, could not exist as man apart from the divine grace of general revelation. This general revelation, so far as it goes, is saving revelation, for there is no such thing as a non-saving knowledge of God. But, of course, it is not the complete knowledge of God, for this comes only by his special revelation through the prophetic history of Israel and its culmination in Christ. (Alan Richardson 1977, 295)

In other words, special revelation reaches its highest point in Christ. In Islam, what the Prophet Muhammad spoke to and taught peoples about God's commands is considered as the revelation form God. The Qur'an says

وَمَا يَنطِقُ عَنَّ الْهُوَٰلِيَّةِ ۚ إِنَّهُ الَّذِي يُوحَى عَلَى هَمَّةِ شَهِيدِ الْقُوَٰرِ  
ذَٰلِكَ مَرَّةٌ وَفَاتَ لَهُ يَدَ الْعَظِيمِ ۖ وَلاَ يَقُولُ إِلَيْهِ شَيْءٌ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ مَا كَذَبَ الْفَوْعَادُ ۖ وَلَقَدْ رَأَىْ...

Meaning: Nor does he say (aught) of (his own) desire. It is no less than inspiration [revelation] sent down to him: He was taught by one mighty in power, endued with wisdom for he appeared (in stately form) while he was in the highest part of
the horizon. Then he approached and came closer, and was at a distance of but two bow-length or (even) nearer. So did (Allah) convey the inspiration [the revelation] to his servant – (conveyed) what He (meant) to convey. The (prophet's) (mind and) heart in no way falsified that which he saw. . (surah al-Najm, 53:3–11)

Relating to the different concepts and understandings of revelation in Christian and Islamic theology, Kenneth Cragg says:

As the Christian faith understands and receives Him, Christ is “the Word of God” He in Himself constitutes what God wants to say, God, that is, engages in speech. He is not content that there should be a barrier of silence and, therefore, of unknowing between Himself and man. Whereas the ultimate speech of God for Islam is prophecy, “sealed”, as the phrase goes, or accomplished, in Muhammad, the speech of God for the Christian is personality – a human life in all the revealing human situations, the Person of Jesus Christ in the flesh, Whose antecedents, character, history, and meaning for men are sufficiently recorded in the Bible. The Bible thus becomes a secondary ‘word’ – the written word preserving and expressing the incarnate. There is the Life that reveals; there is the history that describes. The latter is the means to the continuing accessibility of the former. (Kenneth Cragg 1956, 272)

Sayyid Ahmad Khan says that the Qur’an teaches Muslim to believe in other holy scriptures revealed by God to His prophets. Those holy scriptures such as the Torah, Zabur, Suhuf Anbiya‘, Injil and the Qur’an are the very words of God and no doubt they came from Him. Many passages in the Qur’an, as he adds again, ask Muslim to believe in those books. The Qur’an says

نَزَّلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مَعْدُونًا مَّا يُبِينُ يَدَّهُ وَانْزَلَ النُّورَةَ وَالْأَنجِيلَ مِنْ قَبْلِ هَذَا لِلنَّاسِ وَانْزَلَ الْفُرْقَانَ

(Surah al-Imran, 3:3)

Meaning
It is He who sent down to thee [Muhammad (step by step) in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down Law [The Torah] (of Moses) and the Gospel [Injil] (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind, and He sent down the Criterion (of judgment between right and wrong) [the Qur’an].

It should be noted here that as a Muslim scholar, Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s view on Biblical scriptures and other revealed books is within an Islamic framework. Therefore, he believes that the Qur’an is the final message revealed by God to the prophet Muhammad. (Sayyid Ahmad
Khan 1887, 1. 32). According to him, while there are the five outstanding holy scriptures revealed by God to His prophets already mentioned, Islam does not limit the number of revealed scriptures only to them. He considered that all books that came from God are authentic and genuine gifts from heaven. He is of the opinion that the present Old Testament does not include its total contents revealed. He therefore divides three parts of the Old Testament:

1. Those books which are contained in the Bible.
2. Those books whose existence once [sic] should not be doubted, but that they are not forthcoming now.
3. The apocryphal writings, some of which also are not forthcoming.

(Sayyid Ahmad Khan 1887, 1. 40)

In the first division, Sayyid Ahmad Khan includes all books in the present Old Testament. The books which are listed in the second division are:

1. The covenant of Moses.
4. The book of Jehu, the son of Hanani.
5. The book of Shemah, the prophet.
6. The Prophecy of Ahijab, the Shilonite.
7. The book of Nathan, the prophet.
8. The visions of Iddo, the Seer.
10. The book of Israah, the prophet, the son of Amoz.
11. The vision of Israah, the prophet, the son of Amoz.
12. The book of Samuel, the Seer.
13. The Solomon’s 1,005 Songs.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan believes that the above books were prophetic writings which no longer exist. He then lists the following books which he considers in the third division:

1-7 The seven books of Seth
8. The book of Hanock or Idris
9. The Revelation of Abraham
10. The Revelation of Moses
11. The book of the little Genesis. This book was rejected by the Christian Council held at Trent.
12. The assumption of Moses
13. The testament of Moses
14. The book of the Mysteries of Moses
15. The Ascension of Moses
16. The book of Esdras ['Ezra] no. 1
17. The book of Esdras ['Ezra] no. 2
18. The book of Tobit
19. The book of Judith
20. The rest of the chapters of the book of Esther
21. The Wisdom of Solomon
22. The Wisdom of Jesus the son of Serach, or Ecclesiasticus.
23. The book of Baruch
24. The song of the three Holy children
25. The History of Susanna
26. The History of the Destruction of Bel and the Dragon
27. The prayer of Manasses King of Judah
28. First book of the Maccabees
29. The Second book of the Maccabees
30. The book of the Ascension of Isaiah
31. The Preaching of Habakkuk.

According to him again, the books in the third division are excluded from the present canonical books. Some Christian sects, adds Sayyid Ahmad Khan, considered some of those books as “books of religious authority” Some of those books also were at the beginning accepted among the canonical books. Then they were excluded from them because their genuineness was doubtful. The Christians also universally rejected some of them. As regards the New Testament, Sayyid Ahmad Khan clarifies that what he means by the New Testament is those revelations which came down to Jesus and were recorded by his apostles. Muslim call them Ḥadīth.

The four Gospels are canonical books and therefore they are classed in the first division. There are many other books which have been excluded from the canonical books of the scriptures and therefore they are rejected by the Christians. The rejected books are classed in the second division and listed below:

1. The Gospel of the Infancy of Christ by St. Matthew
2. The Gospel of the birth of Mary
3. The Prot-evangelion of James. [The Gospel of Jacob]
4. The Gospel of Nicodemus
5. The Gospel of Peter
6. The Second Gospel of John
7. The Gospel of the disciple Andrew
8. The Gospel of Philip
9. The Gospel of Bartholomew
10. The Gospel of Thomas
11. The Gospel of the Infancy of Christ by Thomas
12. The Gospel of the Infancy of Christ by Thomas
13. The Gospel of Matthias
15. The Gospel of Barnabas
16. The Gospel of Thaddaeus
17. The Gospel of Paul
18. The Gospel of Appelles
19. The Gospel of Basilides
20. The Gospel of Cernthys
21. The Gospel of the Ebonites
22. The Gospel of the Encartites
23. The Gospel of Eve
24. The Gospel according to the Hebrews
25. The Gospel under the name of Jude
26. The Gospel under the name of Judas Iscariot
27. The Gospel of Marcion
28. The Gospel of Merinthus
29. The Gospel according to the Nazarenes
30. The Gospel of Perfection
31. The Gospel of Scythianus
32. The Gospel of Titan
33. The Gospel of Truth used by the Valentinians
34. The Gospel of Valentinus.

Besides the four Gospels, the rest of the books in the present New Testament such as “the Acts of the Apostles”, “The Epistle to the Romans” and many others are also classed in the First Division along with the four Gospels. There are ninety rejected books of the New Testament as listed by Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Among them are The Epistle of Mary to Ignatius, the Epistle of Mary to the Sicilians, the Book of Genesis by Mary, the Book of Mary, the tradition of Mary, the Book of the miracles of Christ by Mary, the Book of the Doctrines of the Apostles, the death of Mary by John, the particulars of Christ’s descending from the Cross by John and many other books. Apart from those books, it is also reported that Jesus himself produced several books as follows:

1. The Epistle to Abgarus
2. Ditto to Paul and Peter
3. The Book of Proverbs and Preaching
4. A Hymn which Christ taught to his disciples.
5. The Book on Magic
6. The Book on the birth of Christ, Mary and her nurse.
7. The Christ Epistle which fell down from Heaven directed to a
   priest named Leopas in the city of Eras.

At this stage we see Sayyid Ahmad Khan did not give his view on
whether it is correct or not to exclude all those books which are classed in
the second and third divisions of the canonical books of the Biblical
scriptures. In many places in his Tabyin al-Kalam, he referred to the
works of Thomas Hartwell Horne and Nathaniel Lardner in order to
develop his writings on Biblical subjects.

In his discourse on “to find out which of these books are authentic
and what rule there is according to the Muslims to confirm the
authenticity of the book”, Sayyid Ahmad Khan is of the opinion that
the authenticity of a book chiefly depends on whether the author of the
book is mu’tabar (worthy of credence) or not.

If he [i.e. the author] is worthy of credence, then the book too. If not, the book,
likewise, cannot be relied upon. Further, if the book has been ascribed (mansub)
to a trustworthy person, then the sanad (i.e. ascription, the chain of authorities on
which a tradition is based) is needed, to establish the fact that the book in
question truly has been written by the person [it is ascribed to]. As long as we have
not an uninterrupted chain (sanad-i muttasil) from our time up to the author of
the book, this fact [of his authorship] has not been established. By sanad-i muttasil
we meant that a trustworthy person has “learnt” this book from the original
writer, then a second person from this person and so on in a way that his [the
original author’s] testimony has arrived up to the present in the very manner.
(Sayyid Ahmad Khan 1887, 1 43)

Apart from this condition in judging whether the book is mu’tabar or
not, he also mentions other qa’idah or rules in order to establish whether
the book is reliable or unreliable. According to him, there are four
divisions of books considered to be genuine and reliable:

1. To this category belong those books whose authentically has never
   been called in question, whose renown had spread from city to city;
   books which were used by the pious and learned men of every age;
   and which were unanimously allowed & accepted as true and
   orthodox. To the truth of books so vouched we at once give in our
   adhesion.

2. In this class are placed books, that authors of which enjoyed high
   reputation and acceptance in their days. These books were generally
   known and esteemed but they did not gain universal acceptance and
   although they were largely used for references by other writers and
for quotation purposes, they in the causes of time lose their
influences in the mind of men and gradually sunk into oblivion after
attaining temporary acceptance. These books were at one time very
popular and eventually lose their position in reference works. These
books we also admit to be authentic and worthy of trust but of
comparatively less value than those of class one.

3. In this division are reckoned those books which, although written
by eminent men, never attained to any general circulation, and were
not adopted as text books by the scholar of the age, nor were they
quoted by contemporary or subsequent writers. Such books we do
not hold to be of unquestionable authority.

4. The fourth and last class is composed of books which were wholly
unknown to antiquity, and made their appearance at a compara-
tively later period, without attracting the notice of the able and
learned men of the time. Such books we do not regard as
trustworthy or authentic.

Studying throughout his three volumes of Bible commentaries, one
can see that Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s views on Biblical scriptures,
particularly the New Testament were more sympathetic than other
Muslim scholars in India.

In his discussion on the Muslim religious view towards the
corruption of the sacred scriptures, Sayyid Ahmad Khan followed
Imām Fakhruddin al-Razi and Shah Waliyullah. Therefore, based on
Imān al-Razi’s interpretation of the word Tahrīf, he discusses this crucial
topic.

According to Imām al-Razi the word Tahrīf means “to change, to
alter, to turn aside anything from its truth.

التحريف التغيير والتبدل والتحريف هو مالاً الشيء عن حقه

This is in fact a general meaning of the word Tahrīf. But when this word
is applied to the sacred scriptures, it means “a wilful corruption of the
word of God from its true and original purport and intent” (Sayyid
Ahmad Khan 1887, 1:64).

Sayyid Ahmad Khan is of the opinion that the tahrīf occurs in eight
different ways:

1. By adding words or phrases which were not there originally
2. By striking out existing words or phrases.
3. By the substitution of other words, differing in meaning from
those struck out.
4. By making verbal changes while reading, so as to convey to the
car words different from what were written.
5. By reading only some passages, and omitting others.
6. By instructing the people in a manner contrary to God's teaching in his holy word, and yet making them believe that this instruction is the true word.
7. By adopting an improper meaning of certain words of ambiguous or equivocal interpretation, which does not suit the sense intended.
8. By misinterpreting those passages which are mysterious and allegorical (Sayyid Ahmad Khan 1887, 1:66).

The first four types of Tahrīf is called Tahrīf Lafzi or verbal corruption and the last four Tahrīf ma'nawi or corruption of the sense or meaning of sacred scripture. According to Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the first three kinds of Tahrīf are not practised although some other Muslim scholars believe these have been practised. This is because these scholars includes under the name of Tahrīf “all books or writings which being the productions of individuals, have been falsely published under the name of prophets or apostles”, and because they proved that some of the Jews practised those three types of Tahrīf. They accordingly claim some of Christian orthodox made these deliberate corruptions. Sayyid Ahmad Khan rejects the arguments used by those scholars in interpreting these three types of Tahrīf as practised corruptions. He says that,

these arguments are not sound; nor do such alterations or interpolations pertain to those corruptions which are spoken of in the Holy Koran (Qur'an). (Sayyid Ahmad Khan 1887, 1:68)

He emphasises that the publication of a book by an individual under the name of a prophet or an apostle cannot be considered acts of the corruption of the truth. Apart from that, if anybody interpolates sacred scriptures of his private copy, then “it is a mere isolated fact, quite unconnected with the general question under discussion”. What we have to consider, he adds, is that whether Biblical scriptures which had spread throughout Christendom and Judaism really being corrupted with those three types of Tahrīf. On the other hand, the interpolations practised by the Orthodox Christians, as some Muslim scholars argue, are not parallel to what the Qur'an means by the word Tahrīf. This is due to the fact that people who made alterations did not intend to corrupt the scriptures. They thought that those alterations were the real truth.

In order to support his view on this subject, Sayyid Ahmad Khan refers to the ideas of several great Muslim scholars who are in favour of his view. Among them are Imām Mohamad Ismail Bukhari, one of the most outstanding Hadith collectors, Shah Waliyullah and Imām
Fakhruddin Al-Razi. *Imâm Bukhari* says that the meaning of the word *Tahrîf* is "(" אַלָּא" ")" meaning losing (of the sacred Scriptures). But, he adds, nobody could be lose a single word from the books of Allah, so that the Jews and the Christians could only misrepresent the words of God and not lose them. *Imâm* Ibn Taimiyah also was asked about the same subject. He said that there are two different views relating to this matter: some say that the word *Tahrîf* is to mean interpolation of words and others believe that it means the misrepresentation of the meaning of a subject and Ibn Taimiyah was in favour of the latter opinion. Sayyid Ahmad Khan quotes Shah Waliyullah for the opinion that although people had habits of corrupting certain passages in paraphrases and commentaries on book of the Old Testament, yet they did not make unauthorised changes in the original texts of the scriptures. Ibn 'Abbas also thought the same as Shah Waliyullah. It is also mentioned by *Imâm* al-Razi, on the authority of Ibn Abbas, that the Jews and the early Christians were suspected of changing the text of the Old and New Testaments. On the other hand, the corruption of the original text of the scriptures is believed to be impossible by Muslim theologians (*almutakallimûn*). This is due to the fact that both the Old and New Testaments were well known and widely circulated among the people that made this *Tahrîf* impossible.

*Imâm* Fakhruddin al-Razi also asks how it was possible to alter the Old Testament while it was so well known among the people. The answer given by him in this respect is parallel to what the Qur'ân mentions in Sura Al-'Imran, verse 78, thus

وآن منهم لفريقا يلون السنتهم بالكتاب
لتحسوسهم من الكتاب وما هو من الكتاب ويقولون هو من
عناد الله وما هو من عناد الله ويقولون على الله الكذب هم
يعلمون.

(Surah Al-'Imran, 3 78)

Meaning:
There is among them a section who distort the Book with their tongues: (as they read) you would think it is a part of the Book, but it is not part of the Book; and they say, "That is from Allah"; It is they who tell a lie against Allah, and (well) they know it.

Accordingly, *Imâm* Fakhruddin al-Razi points out that only a few
persons were involved in such a work of corrupting the ‘book of the Old Testament. This is what is meant by the word *Tahrif*. He also gives his comment on other Qur’anic passages in Sura al-Nisa’, verse 46 in which the Qur’an says:

من الذين هادوا يحرفون الكلم عن مواضعه وقولون سمعنا
وعصينا وأسمع غير مسمع وراءنا بالسنتهم وعليا في
dينهم. ولو أنهم قالوا سمعنا وأطعنا واسمعنا وانظرنا
لكان خيرا لهم واقوم ولكن لعنهم الله يكفرهم فلا
يؤمنون إلا قليلا.

Meaning
Of the Jews there are those who displace words from their (right) places, and say “We hear and we disobey”; and “Hear what is not heard” and “Ra’ima”, with a twist of their tongues and a slander to faith. If only they had said “We hear and we obey”; and “Do hear”; and “Do look at us” it would have been better for them, and more proper; but Allah hath cursed them for their unbelief; and but few of them will believe.

Relating to these verses, *Imām* al-Razi asks how is it possible that an alteration took place into the book of God when it was so well known in the East and the West. The answer he gives is that the number of people who made the change was small and the number of those who had any knowledge about the scripture were still fewer. As a result it was possible to misrepresent the text without discovery. The second answer given by him to that question is that what is meant by *Tahrif* is to create false doubts, to make the corrupted interpretation and commentary and to pull the word and pronunciation from its right meaning to falsehood by verbal artifices.

ان المراد بالتحريف القاء الشبهه / الباطلة
والتأويلات / والتأويلات / الفاسدة وجر النفظ من معناه
الحق إلى الباطل بوجه الحيل النفظية.

*Imām* al-Razi is in favour of the second answer.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan also refers to the ideas of Ibn al-Munzir and Ibn Abi Hatim in the *Tafsir* of Darmanthur who believe that the Torah and the Injil have not received any change of words. In other words, they are pure as they were when revealed by God, But the Jews made *Tahrif* or corruption and wrong interpretation.
All these arguments have been used by Sayyid Ahmad Khan to prove the first three kinds of Tahrif as mentioned earlier have not been practised. The sacred scriptures have not been altered in accordance with any of those three types of Tahrif. But he believes that the other five kinds of Tahrif had taken place. For example, the Jews made a verbal change in Sura al-Baqarah verses 58-59 in which the Qur'an says:

وادخلوا الباب سجدا وقولوا حطة نغفر لكم خطأكم وسنزيد

المحسنين. فذل الذين ظلموا قولا غير الذي قيل لهم فاتركنا

على الذين ظلموا رحمتا من السماء بما كانوا يفسلون.

Meaning:
And remember We said: “Enter this town, and eat of the plenty therein as ye wish but enter that gate with humility, in posture and in words, and We shall forgive you your faults and increase (the portion of) those who do good. But the transgressors changed the word from that which had been given them, so We which sent on the transgressors a plague from heaven, for that they infringed (Our command) repeatedly.

According to Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the word “حَطْةٌ (حَطْةٌ) Hittatun in the above passage which means forgiveness had been changed to the word “حَطْةٌ (حَطْةٌ) (Hintatun) in pronouncing it. The meaning of the word “حَطْةٌ (حَطْةٌ) is wheat. Therefore, the Jews interpreted the word (Hittatun) in the above passage as totally different from its original meaning. The Tahrif in the above passage, as he understands, is only verbal alteration. In other words, “the alterations were of words only as conveyed to the ear, and not of the written text” Therefore, he excludes this verbal change in pronunciation from those three types of the Tahrif as mentioned earlier.

In Sura Al-'Imran, verse 78, the Qur'an says

وإن منهم لزلفا يلون السنتهم بالكتاب لتحمسوه من الكتاب

وما هو من الكتاب ويقولون هو من عندالله وما هو من عندالله

ويقولون على الله الكذب وهم يعلمون.

Meaning:
There is among them a section who distort the Book with their tongues: (As they read) you would think it is a part of the Book, but it is no part of the Book; and they say, “That is from Allah”, but it is not from Allah: it is they who tell a lie against Allah, and (well) they know it.
Regarding the above passage, Sayyid Ahmad Khan is of the opinion
that readers of the Holy Scriptures had habits of changing the words in
the scriptures to their own words. But there is no evidence to prove that
there was any meddling or interference with the original texts of the
scriptures. All these passages and some other Quranic verses as referred
by Sayyid Ahmad Khan in Sura Al-Nisa’ verse 46, Al-Ma’idah verse 14,
dan Al-Baqarah verse 75, are clear proofs that the Tahrif in the fourth
type took place as mentioned in the Qur’an. On the other hand, those
Qur’anic passages also prove that the Tahrif as the Qur’an mentions is
not parallel to any of the first three kinds of Tahrif.

With respect to the fifth type of Tahrif, Sayyid Ahmad Khan also
present several arguments which show that it happened. In this Tahrif, a
reader of the holy scriptures reads some passages and then omits others.
It happened when a Jew read the holy scripture of the Torah on the
subject of stoning to death for the crime of adultery. It is narrated by
Imām Bukhari from Abdullah Ibn ‘Umar that the Jew who read that
scripture hid the passage that related to the penalty of adultery with the
palm of his hand. Realising the cheat, ‘Abdullah Ibn Salam took off the
reader’s hand from hidden passage of the scripture.

The Qur’an says in Sura al-Baqarah or ‘The Heifer’, thus

ان الذين كُتِبَت مَا أُنزل من بيتاتٍ والهدى من نعمة بيناه
للناس في الكتاب اولئك يلمعهم الله ويلعنهما اللعنة إلا الذين
تأووا وأصلحوا وبيَّنا فآولئك انوب عليهم وانا التواب

(al-Baqarah, 2 159 – 160)

meaning: Those who conceal the clear (signs) We have sent down, and the
Guidance, after We have made it clear for the people in the Book, – on them shall
be Allah’s curse, and the curse of those entitled to curse, except those who repent
and make amends and openly declare (the truth); to them I turn; for I am oft –
Returning, Most Merciful. (Surah al-Baqarah, 2 159 – 160)

According to Imām Al-Razi’s commentary, Ibn ‘Abbas narrated a
story that relates to the revelation of these passages. His group of Al-
Ansar asked a Jew about the attribute of the prophet Muhammad (peace
be upon him) as mentioned in the Torah and the laws in their Holy
Scripture. But the Jews hid them. Then, those verses were revealed. This
incident proves that ‘the Jew hid certain passages of scriptures, not that
they struck them out of the book.
There are many other examples from the Qur'an which show that the fifth class of Tahrīf was practised. Passages from the Sura Al-Baqara verse 174, Al-Imran verse 187 and Al-Ma' idah verse 16 have been quoted by Sayyid Ahmad Khan in support of his view.

Relating to the sixth type of Tahrīf, where people have been given the teaching of God in a way which is against His words, Sayyid Ahmad Khan then, quotes Quranic passages as follows:

يابها الذين أمنوا ان كثيرا من الاحرار والرهبان ليأكلون اموال الناس بالباطل ويصدون عن سبيل الله.

(Surah al-Taubat, 9:34)

Meaning:
"O ye who believe! There are indeed many among the priests and anchorites, who in falsehood devour the substance of men and hinder (them) from the way of Allah.

According to Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the word al-Bā Intl in the above passage, which means ‘in falsehood’ or ‘in vanity’, is to be interpreted that it was a habit of some people to proclaim teachings which are against the commands of God. They also practised taking bribes from their followers. Imām al-Razi, in his Tafsir al-Kabir which becomes a main source of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, mentions that Muslim commentators have different views on the interpretation of the word al-bā Intl. Some interpreters believe that those priests and anchorites (the scripture readers) used to take money from their followers in order to reduce the sentences (al-akhām) and obtain forgiveness (al-musāmahat) of the Shari'at or the laws. The also claimed openly that there was no other way to get salvation (al-fawz) except serving and obeying them and donating the money for the priests’ pleasures. The people were easily misled with those lies.

With respect to the seventh and eighth types of Tahrīf, namely “adopting an improper meaning of certain words of ambiguous or equivocal interpretation, which does not suit the sense intended” and “misinterpreting those passages which are mysterious and allegorical”, there was little difference between them. Therefore, the same Quranic passages have been used by Sayyid Ahmad Khan in order to prove that these two kinds of Tahrīf took place. The Qur’an says:

ولا تليسوا الحق بالباطل وتكثروا الحق واتمَّ تعلمون

(al-Baqarah, 2:42)
Meaning:
And cover not truth with falsehood, nor conceal the truth when ye know (What it is) (Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 42).

*Imām al-Raźı points out that it is said “Do not cover the truth” because of the confusions the Jews made to the listeners. The Jews were disputing those texts and they were whispering to the people about the proof of the coming of the prophet Muhammad. They were called whisperers due to the confusions they made relating to those texts. This is what the Qur'anic passages mean by the words: “(ولأ تليسوا الحقّ)” i.e. “and do not cover the truth”

With regard to this commentary, Sayyid Ahmad Khan points out that the Qur'an reminds the Jews not to put a false meaning to words. Thus also means that the Jews were not guilty “of mutilating the written text”

In sura Al-'Imran, the Qur'an also says:

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يا أهل الكتاب لم تليسون الحق بالباطل وتكملون الحق واتمم تعلمون.
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Meaning:
Ye people of the Book! Why do ye clothe the truth with falsehood, and conceal the Truth while ye have knowledge. (Surah Al-Imran, 3: 71)

According to the commentary of *Imām al-Raźı, often quoted by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the Jews attempted to hide those passages which indicate to the prophethood of Muhammad.

According to al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr again, the purpose of some one who attempts to hide the truth is either to raise doubts (al-shubhāt) and display what is true as being false or to hide the proof that indicates the truth. The first purpose is indicated by the passage “( لم تليسون الحق )” and the passage “( تكملون الحق )” indicates of the second purpose. Moreover, Al-Hasan and Ibn Zaid explain that the passage “( ليس الحق بالباطل )” meaning “the Truth is covered by falsehood” has many meanings and one of them is an alteration of the Old Testament. According to Al-Hasan and Ibn Zaid, the Jews adulterated the revealed passages.

A second opinion on this matter was given by Ibn 'Abbas and Qata’dah. They say that the Jews of Medina were prepared to acknowledge Islam at first but at the end of the day, they created doubts among the people.

According to al-Qadhi, there is in the Torah an indication of good news about the prophethood of Muhammad and his attributes. There are
also some passages in the Torah which have a different view about the prophethood of Muhammad like al-Muhkam and al-mutashabih in the Qur'an Al-muhkam is a passage that has a clear meaning while al-mutashabih has an obscure meaning. Therefore, a reader of the scriptures does not know the meaning of an al-mutashabih passage. Therefore, the Jews created confusion relating to this matter among the weak people.

The fourth and last point on this subject is that the Jews claimed that the Prophet Muhammad acknowledged that Moses was right and the Torah shows that the Shari‘at or laws of Moses are not abrogated.

All these arguments, as Imám al-Razi says in his al-Tafsír al-Kabír, create al-shubhat or confusion to the people.

Therefore, we see they are included by al-Razi and often quoted by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, under the name Tahríf of Holy Scriptures.

CONCLUSION

Based on all these passages from the Qur’an Sayyid Ahmad Khan comes to the conclusion that what is meant by the alteration and the corruption of the sacred scriptures do not imply “an actual mutilation of the text; but simply the modifying of words when read to another, or the concealing of passages; or the transgressing of the commandments of god; or misinterpreting or misconstruing the words of God”. He also concludes that what the Qur’an speaks against is the practice of some people who published books that are not genuine under the names of distinguished people. This also includes what the Qur’an says:

فويل للذين يكتبون الكتاب بأيديهم ثم يقولون هذا من عندالله
ليشروا به ثمناً قليلًا وويل لهم ما كتبوا أيديهم وويل لهم مما يكسبون.

(al-Baqarah, 2 79)

Meaning:
Then woe to those who wrote the Book with their own hands and they say: “This is from Allah”, to traffic with it for a miserable price! – woe to them for what their hands do write, and the gain they make thereby. (Surah al-Baqarah 2:79)

It is clear that Sayyid Ahmad Khan bases most of his arguments about the corruption or Tahríf of the Holy scriptures on Imám al-Razi’s Al-Tafsír al-Kabír. The main point which he tries to prove is that most
Tahrīf occurred in the form of tahrīf maʾanawi (corruption of meaning). He strongly believes that the first three types of tahrīf lafzi (verbal corruption) did not take place. He does not deny, however, that tahrīf lafzi occurred in the fourth category but it is not so strong as those first three kinds of tahrīf lafzi.

In his eight discourse in the Tabyin al-Kalām on the subject of “Are these books (The Old and New Testaments) exactly the same as the original books written at the time of Revelation”, Sayyid Ahmad Khan says that the present Bible is the Holy scriptures to which the Qurʾān refers and they existed during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and even before Islam advented (Dar 1971, 92).

Observing Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s early works on the Biblical studies such as Tabyin al-Kalām fi Tafṣīr al-Taurāt wa al Injil ‘alā mīlāt al-Islām as a whole, one can see the views and attitudes existing in his works differ from the works of other Muslim scholars in India regarding the subject of Biblical scriptures. Rahmat Allah, for example, took an uncompromising attitude by completely rejecting the present Bible as unreliable. On the contrary, Sayyid Ahmad Khan accepts the present Bible as the Holy Scriptures which are mentioned by the Qurʾān. As a Muslim, his religious idea and attitudes are totally bound by the Qurʾān.

Although his ideas on certain aspects of Islamic principles are different from other Muslim scholars, yet they are not against Islamic principles. On the contrary, those ideas are his ‘ijtihād on certain subjects in which the Qurʾān gives general clues in understanding them. These include his religious ideas as he presented them in the Tabyin al-Kalām and his other works.

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