

THE HOLY QUR'ĀN

That certain verses of the Holy Qur'ān are abrogated

The theory of abro- by others is now an exploded theory.
gation.

The two passages on which it was supposed to rest refer, really, to the abrogation, not of the passages of the Holy Qur'ān but, of the previous revelations whose place the Holy Qur'ān has taken. The first verse is contained in the chapter *al-Nahl*—a Makka revelation—and runs thus: "And when We change one message for another message,¹ and Allāh knows best what He reveals, they say, Thou art only a forger" (16 : 101). Now it is a fact admitted on all hands that details of the Islamic law were revealed at Madīna, and it is in relation to these details that the theory of abrogation has been broached. Therefore a Makka revelation would not speak of abrogation. But the reference in the above verse is to the abrogation, not of the Quranic verses, but of the previous Divine messages or revelations, involved by the revelation of the Holy Qur'ān. The context shows this clearly to be the case, for the opponents are here made to say that the Prophet was a forger. Now the opponents called the Prophet a forger, not because he announced the abrogation of certain verses of the Holy Qur'ān, but because he claimed that the Holy Qur'ān was a Divine revelation which had taken the place of previous revelations. Their contention was that the Qur'ān was not a revelation at all: "Only a mortal teaches him" (16 : 103). Thus they called the whole of the Qur'ān a forgery and not merely a particular verse of it. The

If it was really part of the Qur'ān, why should people say that 'Umar had added to the Book of God.

1. The word *āya* occurring here means originally *a sign*, and hence it comes to signify *an indication* or *evidence* or *proof*, and is used in the sense of a *miracle*. It also signifies *risāla* or *a Divine message* (T.A.). The word is frequently used in the Holy Qur'ān in its general sense of a Divine message or a Divine communication, and is, therefore, applicable to a portion of the Holy Qur'ān or to any previous revelation. It carries the latter significance here as the context clearly shows.

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theory of abrogation, therefore, cannot be based on this verse which speaks only of one revelation or one law taking the place of another.

The other verse which is supposed to lend support to the theory is 2 : 106 : "Whatever communication We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring one better than it or one like it."¹ A reference to the context will show that the Jews or the followers of previous revelations are here addressed. Of these it is said again and again : "We believe in that which was revealed to us ; and they deny what is besides that" (2:91). So they were told that if one revelation was abrogated, it was only to give place to a better. And there is mention not only of abrogation but also of something that was forgotten. Now the words "or cause to be forgotten" cannot refer to the Holy Qur'ān at all, because no portion of the Holy Book could be said to have been forgotten so as to require a new revelation in its place. There is no point in supposing that God should first make the Holy Prophet forget a verse and then reveal a new one in its place. Why not, if he really had forgotten a verse, remind him of the one forgotten? But even if we suppose that his memory ever failed in retaining a certain verse (which really never happened), that verse was quite safely preserved in writing, and the mere failure of the memory could not necessitate a new revelation. That the Prophet never forgot what was recited to him by the Holy Spirit is plainly stated in the Holy Qur'ān : "We

1. Sale's translation of the words is misleading and has actually deceived many writers on Islām who had no access to the original. He translates the words *nunsi-hā* as meaning *We cause thee to forget*. Now the text does not contain any word meaning *thee*. The slight error makes the verse mean that Almighty God had caused the Holy Prophet to forget certain Quranic verses; whereas the original does not say that the Prophet was made to forget anything but clearly implies that the world was made to forget.

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shall make thee recite, so thou shalt not forget" (87: 6). History also bears out the fact that he never forgot any portion of the Qur'anic revelation. Sometimes the whole of a very long chapter would be revealed to him in one portion, as in the case of the sixth chapter which extends over twenty sections, but he would cause it to be written down without delay, and make his Companions learn it by heart, and recite it in public prayers, and that without the change of even a letter; notwithstanding the fact that he himself could not read from a written copy; nor did the written copies, as a rule, remain in his possession. It was a miracle indeed that he never forgot any portion of the Qur'ān, though other things he might forget, and it is to his forgetfulness in other things that the words *except what Allah pleases* (87: 7) refer. On the other hand, it is a fact that parts of the older revelation had been utterly lost and forgotten, and thus the Holy Qur'ān was needed to take the place of that which was abrogated, and that which had been forgotten by the world.

"The ḥadīth speaking of abrogation are all weak"

Ḥadīth on abrogation. says Ṭabrisī. But it is stranger still that the theory of abrogation has been accepted by writer after writer without ever thinking that not a single ḥadīth, however weak, touching on the abrogation of a verse, was traceable to the Holy Prophet. It never occurred to the upholders of this theory that the Qur'anic verses were promulgated by the Holy Prophet, and that it was he whose authority was necessary for the abrogation of any Qur'anic verse; no Companion, not even Abū Bakr or 'Alī, could say that a Qur'anic verse was abrogated. The Holy Prophet alone was entitled to say so, and there is not a single ḥadīth to the effect that he ever said so; it is always some Companion or a later authority to whom such views are to be traced. In most cases where a report

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is traceable to one Companion who held a certain verse to have been abrogated, there is another report traceable to another Companion to the effect that that verse was not abrogated.¹ It shows clearly that the opinion of one Companion as to the abrogation of a verse would be questioned by another Companion. Even among later writers we find that there is not a single verse on which the verdict of abrogation has been passed by one without being questioned by another ; and while there are writers who would lightly pass the verdict of abrogation on hundreds of verses, there are others who consider not more than five to be abrogated, and even in the case of these five the verdict of abrogation has been seriously impugned by earlier writers.

The theory of abrogation has in fact arisen from a misconception of the use of the word *naskh* by the Companions of the Holy Prophet. When the significance of one verse was limited by another, it was sometimes spoken of as having been abrogated (*nusikhat*) by that other. Similarly when the words of a verse gave rise to a misconception, and a later revelation cleared up that misconception, the word *naskh* was metaphorically used in connection with it, the idea underlying its use being, not that the first verse was abrogated, but that a certain conception to which it had given rise was abrogated.²

1. Some examples may be noted here. 2 : 180 is held by some to have been abrogated while others have denied it (IJ-C) ; 2 : 184 is considered by Ibn 'Umar as having been abrogated while Ibn 'Abbās says it was not (Bu) ; 2 : 240 was abrogated according to Ibn Zubair while Mujāhid says it was not (Bu.). I have taken these examples only from the second chapter of the Holy Qur'an.

2. Many instances of this may be quoted. In 2 : 284, it is said " whether you manifest what is in your minds or hide it, Allāh will call you to account for it ; " while according to 2 : 286, " Allāh does not impose on any soul a duty but to the extent of its ability." A report in *Bukhārī* says that one of the Companions of the Holy Prophet, probably 'Abd-Allāh ibn 'Umar, held the opinion that the first verse was abrogated (*nusikhat*) by the second.

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Earlier authorities admit this use of the word : " Those who accept *naskh* (abrogation) here (2 : 109) take it as meaning *explanation* metaphorically " (RM.I, p. 292); and again : " By *naskh* is meant metaphorically, explaining and making clear the significance " (*ibid.*, p. 508). It is an abrogation but not an abrogation of the words of the Holy Qur'an; rather is it the abrogation of a misconception of their meaning. This is further made clear by the application of *naskh* to verses containing statement of facts (*akhbār*), whereas, properly speaking, abrogation could only take place in the case of verses containing a commandment or a prohibition (*amr* or *nahy*). In

What was meant by *naskh* (abrogation) in this case is made clear by another detailed report given in the *Musnad* of Aḥmad. According to this report when 2 : 284 was revealed, the Companions entertained an idea which they had never entertained before (or according to another report, they were greatly grieved) and thought that they had not the power to bear it. The matter being brought to the notice of the Holy Prophet, he said : " Rather say, We have heard and we obey and submit," and so God inspired faith in their hearts. As this report shows, what happened was this, that some Companion or Companions thought that 2 : 284 imposed a new burden on them, making every evil idea which entered the mind without taking root or ever being translated into action, punishable in the same manner as if it had been translated into action. 2 : 286 made it plain that this was not the meaning conveyed by 2 : 284, since according to that verse, God did not impose on man a burden which he could not bear. This removal of a misconception was called abrogation (*naskh*) by Ibn 'Umar.

It may be added that there is nothing to show that 2 : 286 was revealed later than 2 : 284. On the other hand, the use of the words *we have heard and we obey* by the Holy Prophet to remove the wrong notion which some Companions entertained—these very words occur in 2 : 285—shows that the three verses, 284, 285, and 286 were all revealed together, and hence the abrogation, in the ordinary sense of the word, of one of them by another is meaningless. There are other instances in which a verse revealed later is thought to have been abrogated by a previous verse. But how could a later verse be abrogated by a previous one? Or what point can there be in giving an order which was cancelled before it was given? If, on the other hand, the word *naskh* is taken to mean the placing of a limitation upon the meaning of a verse, or the removal of a wrong conception attached to it, no difficulty would arise, for even a previous verse may be spoken of as placing a limitation upon the meaning of a later verse or as removing a wrong conception arising therefrom.

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the ordinary sense of the word there could be no *naskh* (abrogation) of a statement made in the Word of God, as that would suggest that God had made a wrong statement first and then recalled it. This use of the word *naskh* by the earlier authorities regarding statements¹ shows that they were using the word to signify the removal of a wrong conception regarding, or the placing of a limitation upon, the meaning of a certain verse. At the same time, it is true that the use of the word *naskh* soon became indiscriminate, and when any one found himself unable to reconcile two verses, he would declare one of them to be abrogated by the other.

The principle on which the theory of abrogation is based is unacceptable, being contrary to the plain teachings of the Holy Qur'an. A verse is considered to be abrogated by another when the two cannot be reconciled with each other; in other words, when they appear to contradict each other. But the Holy Qur'an destroys this foundation when it declares in plain words that no part of the Holy Book is at variance with another: "Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an, and if it were from any

1. One example of one statement being spoken of as abrogated by another is that of 2 : 284, 286 (for which see the previous foot-note). Another is furnished by 8 : 65, 66, where the first verse states that in war the Muslims shall overcome ten times their numbers, and the second, after referring to their weakness at the time—which meant the paucity of trained men among them and their lack of the implements and necessaries of war—states that they shall overcome double their numbers. Now the two verses relate to two different conditions and they may be said to place a limitation upon the meaning of each other, but one of them cannot be spoken of as abrogating the other. In the time of the Holy Prophet when the Muslims were weak, when every man, old or young, had to be called upon to take the field, and the Muslim army was but ill-equipped, the Muslims overcame double, even thrice their numbers; but in the wars with the Persian and Roman empires, they vanquished ten times their number. Both statements were true; they only related to different circumstances and the one placed a limitation upon the meaning of the other, but neither of them actually abrogated the other.

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other than Allāh, they would have found in it many a discrepancy" (4 : 82). It was due to lack of meditation that one verse was thought to be at variance with another; and hence it is that in almost all cases where abrogation has been upheld by one person, there has been another who being able to reconcile the two, has repudiated the alleged abrogation.

It is only among the later commentators that we meet with the tendency to augment the number of verses thought to have been abrogated, and by some of these the figure has been placed as high as five hundred. Speaking of such Sayūṭī says in the *Itqān* : "Those who multiply (the number of abrogated verses) have included many kinds—one kind being that in which there is neither abrogation, nor any particularization (of a general statement), nor has it any connection with any one of them, for various reasons. And this is as in the word of God : 'And spend out of what We have given them' (2 : 3) ; 'And spend out of what We have given you' (63 : 10); and the like. It is said that these are abrogated by the verse dealing with zakāt, while it is not so, they being still in force" (It. II, p. 22). Sayūṭī himself brings the number of verses which he thinks to be abrogated down to twenty-one (*ibid.* p. 23), in some of which he considers there is abrogation, while in others he finds that it is only the particularization of a general injunction that is effected by a later verse ; but he admits that there is a difference of opinion even about these.

A later writer, however, the famous Shāh Walī Allāh of India, commenting on this verdict on five verses. in his *Fauz al-Kabīr* says that abrogation cannot be proved in the case of sixteen out of Sayūṭī's twenty-one verses, but in the case

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of the remaining five he is of opinion that the verdict of abrogation is final. These five verses are dealt with below :

(1) 2 : 180 : "Bequest is prescribed for you when death approaches one of you, if he leaves behind wealth, for parents and near relations, according to usage." As a matter of fact, both Baidzāwī and Ibn Jarīr quote authorities who state that this verse was not abrogated; and it is surprising that it is considered as being abrogated by 4 : 11, 12, which speak of the shares to be given "after the payment of a bequest he may have bequeathed or a debt," showing clearly that the bequest spoken of in 2 : 180 was still in force. This verse in fact speaks of bequest for charitable objects which is even now recognized by Muslims to the extent of one-third of property.

(2) 2 : 240 : "And those of you who die and leave wives behind, (making) a bequest in favour of their wives of maintenance for a year without turning them out." But we have the word of no less an authority than Mujāhid that this verse is not abrogated: "Allāh gave her (*i.e.* the widow) the whole of a year, seven months and twenty days being optional, under the bequest; if she desired she could stay according to the bequest (*i.e.* having maintenance and residence for a year), and if she desired she could leave the house (and remarry), as the Qur'an says: 'Then if they leave of their own accord, there is no blame on you'" (Bu. 65 : 39). This verse, therefore, does not contradict v. 234. Moreover, there is proof that it was revealed after v. 234, and hence it cannot be said to have been abrogated by that verse.

(3) 8 : 65 : "If there are twenty patient ones of you, they shall overcome two hundred, etc." This is said to have been abrogated by the verse that follows it :

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“For the present Allāh has made light your burden and He knows that there is weakness in you, so if there are a hundred patient ones of you, they shall overcome two hundred.” That the question of abrogation does not arise here at all is apparent from the words of the second verse which clearly refers to the early times when the Muslims were weak, having neither munitions of war nor experience of warfare, and when old and young had to go out and fight; while the first verse refers to a later period when the Muslim armies were fully organized and equipped.

(4) 33 : 52 : “It is not allowed to thee to take women after this.” This is said to have been abrogated by a verse which was apparently revealed before it : “O Prophet! We have made lawful to thee thy wives ” (33 : 50). The whole issue has been turned topsy-turvy. As I have said before, a verse cannot be abrogated by one revealed before it. Apparently what happened was this. When 4 : 3 was revealed, limiting the number of wives to four, should exceptional circumstances require, the Prophet was told not to divorce the excess number, and this was effected by 33 : 50 as quoted above; but at the same time he was told not to take any woman in marriage after that, and this was done by 33 : 52.

(5) 58 : 12 : “O you who believe ! when you consult the Apostle, then offer something in charity before your consultation; that is better for you and purer; but if you do not find, then surely Allāh is Forgiving, Merciful.” This is said to have been abrogated by the verse that follows : “Do you fear that you will not be able to give in charity before your consultation? So when you do not do it, and Allāh has turned to you mercifully, then keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate.” It is not easy to see how one of these injunctions

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is abrogated by the other, since there is not the slightest difference in what they say. The second verse merely gives further explanation to show that the injunction is only in the nature of a recommendation, that is to say, a man may give in charity whatever he can easily spare, zakāt (or the legal alms) being the only obligatory charity.

Thus the theory of abrogation falls to the ground on all considerations.

The rule as to the interpretation of the Qur'an is thus given in the Holy Book itself : "He it is Who has revealed the Book to thee; some of its verses are decisive, they are the basis of the Book, and others are allegorical. As for those in whose hearts there is perversity, they follow the part of it which is allegorical; seeking to mislead and seeking to give it their own interpretation; but none knows its interpretation except Allāh, and those well-grounded in knowledge say, We believe in it, it is all from our Lord; and none do mind except those having understanding" (3: 6). In the first place, it is stated here that there are two kinds of verses in the Holy Qur'an, namely the decisive and the allegorical—the latter being those which are capable of different interpretations. Next we are told that the decisive verses are the basis of the Book, that is, that they contain the fundamental principles of religion. Hence whatever may be the differences of interpretation, the fundamentals of religion are not affected by them, all such differences relating only to secondary matters. The third point is that some people seek to give their own interpretation to allegorical statements and are thus misled. In other words, serious errors arise only when a wrong interpretation is placed on words which are susceptible of two meanings. Lastly, in the concluding words,