

Abrogation (*Naskh*) in the Qur'an: An Overview of the Views of Islamic Scholars

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Ibn Manzoor defines *naskh* (abrogation) as copying from the original source word for word and it also means removing of some thing and bringing a different thing in its place. When it is said that a verse has abrogated another verse, it indicates that the commandment it contains has been removed. The Arabs used to say *nasakhatil al-shamasu al-dhil* or *nasakhatil al-rehu asaral-a-diyar* meaning thereby that the wind has changed the rubble or debris of the countries.

The Islamic scholars have regarded abrogation of difficult by easy commands possible in the context of the Qur'an, as the witness of ten by two, but the abrogation of easy command by a severe one is also found feasible in this regard like the abrogation of the fast of 'ashura and limited days (*ayaman m'aadudah*) by the complete month of Ramadan but some times similar command has been abrogated by the similar or equal command like the alteration of the Qiblah. However, some commands were changed with out an alternate command on its place like offering for secret talks, (*sadaqat-ul-najwa*). The Qur'an can abrogate the Qur'an. The scholars of Islam allow that the corroborative reports of the Sunnah can abrogate Qur'an, as is indicated by the Hadith that for an inheritor there is no will, as indicated by Mâlik. But Imam Shafi'i and Abul Farj Malilki have also not accepted this view. But Qartabi regards the first view as more feasible as both are the streams stemming, from the same origin though names are different. However, the *qiyas* can not abrogate the Qur'an, as *qiyas* is not supposed to go against the *nass*.

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Qartabi has also alluded to the fact that this verse was revealed to dispel the doubts created by the Jews, when the Muslims directed their faces towards Ka'abah during their prayers. This verse, in his view, is of very great significance in the respect of the Qur'anic commandments (*ayatun uzma fil-al-ahkām*).

From a different angle the promulgation of one law after another was necessitated under two conditions. Either a situation called for a suppression of an existing law or an existing law had fallen into oblivion and needed to be revived in some form. But the sunnah of Allah or His way is that every new law delivered is an improvement on the previous one. That is the demand of evolution or of the process of perfection.¹

The Qur'an disapproves idle in respect of simple and clear regulations. According to Maulana Majid Daryabadi, the abrogation mentioned here pertains to the Qur'an or the earlier revealed Books. Moreover, the word *ayah* which has been used here has several meanings, like, a sign, a token, or mark, by which a person or thing is known.

It also means the miracle, a wonder of God, an example, a warning, a verse of the Qur'an, or of the former Scriptures. Explaining the theme further the writer says that there is nothing to be ashamed of in the doctrine of certain laws, permanent and universal, and enacted by the same law-giver, specially during the course of the promulgation of that law. The Qur'anic revelation has been avowedly gradual. It took about 23 years to finish and complete the legislation. Small wonder, then that certain others, lasting replaced certain minor laws, admittedly transitory, and eternal. Even Divine laws may be subject to Divine improvement, just as is every object and phenomenon in the physical universe of His creation. It must be, however, clearly understood that the doctrine of abrogation applies to 'law'only, and even there too those of minor or secondary importance. Beliefs, articles of faith, principles of law, narratives, exhortations, moral precepts, and spiritual verities, ---none of these is at all subject to abrogation or repeal. "The abrogation has one important purpose to serve, i.e. it brings in its wake such commandments which are better suited to the exigencies of time and place." Moreover, the phenomenon of the abrogation brings this fact to home that Allah "alone is the Arbiter and Law -giver. He can enact or revoke whatever He wills. None there is to hamper or obstruct

His prerogative."

According to Maulana Amin Ahsan Islahî, the accusations of the Jews can be understood in the backdrop of their thinking that with the abrogation of earlier revelations Jews will be replaced with the Muslims and the Muslims instead of the Jews would be made the leaders of the world. Therefore they wanted to create confusions in the minds of Muslims and create problems for the onward progress of Islamic *da'wah*. Because the abrogation of Torah was tantamount to the fact that the so-called upholders of the Divine Mission were to be replaced (as they could not preserve the integrity) as the custodians of Divine Message. The part of the verse that "don't you know that Allah has full power over everything" shows that Allah, by providing the Jews the *Shari'ah* has not surrendered His authority (*ikhtiyar*) and power (*qudrat*), indicating thereby that He is not going to give any other community His new *Shari'ah* or will not make any change or amendment in it or renovate it, especially in the situation when the Jews have already ruined the real purport of it. Therefore it is being brought to the notice of them that Allah, contrary to their assumptions is the Sovereign, full of authority and He can use His authority always with His infinite wisdom and discretion.²

Maulana Islahî considers this verse related to the abrogation of earlier religions in the light of the context and consistency of the Qur'anic principles. Because the main objection of the people of the Book was that when the Qur'an regards four books as divinely in origin, then why does it talk about their abrogation. The Qur'an has actually replied this question.

The Qur'an indicates that the abrogation is to be seen in the light of the principles 'from better to the best' or in the other words it is the compliance with the promise of Allah, which He made with Moses and Jesus that He will send His last Prophet who will perfect the *Shari'ah* of Allah and will promulgate lawful (*taibat*) and prohibit the unlawful (*khabayth*) and will relieve people from the restrictions, with which they were over burdened at that time.³

Here we have to take care of the following points:

Shari'ah in its evolution has reached the present stage of progress to meet the demands of human nature. Allah has made human nature of such type that it attains perfection in gradual process and with the training by stages, it becomes entitled to

receive divine *Shari'ah* and His religion in its perfect form. Though before reaching this stage, man had received a religion, which no doubt was Islam, (submission before the will of Allah), yet in its external and apparent form religion (the *Shari'ah*) was structured on the patterns of the mental, societal, cultural and collective requirements of the period, hence fulfilling the all the subtle niceties of it, and the human reason reached its maturity, getting freedom from the clutches of sensuous controls and ritualistic bondage, tribal fetters and national barriers, now man could think with out the binding of all such shortcomings. But when the constant training and nurturing of this nature had reached the stage of progress where Islam appeared in the most natural and exemplary form before the world and made its strides and changed the course of history.

At this point of history man was given the gift of Islam which is in total conformity with human nature. It was this progress of man in these spheres that warranted the abrogation of several aspects of earlier *Shari'ahs* and thus Islam appeared in the most natural and exemplary form before the world.⁴

Most of the commandments of *Torah* are a clear evidence of the fact that their revelation was made possible in the context of the circumstances which were fluid, , waiting for the stage of fruition for a new season .It was Islam which provided the atmosphere for such fruition. For example the drinking was prohibited for the custodians of worship houses, which was an allusion in a subtle way that the wine is going to be prohibited for all people, as it is against the piety and purity. Islam in this first step declared consumption of wine prohibited at the time of offering prayers (as it was not allowed at this time) and later on with the passage of time it was completely made unlawful. The prudent among the believers had gauged at the first announcement about the wine that with the passage of time the wine is going to be prohibited and they had even abandoned consuming wine .In the same way there were commandments regarding the eatables and their lawfulness and unlawfulness, some of them were prohibited because of the national and community taste of Israelites or were prohibited in a way to punish them for their unnecessary questions they asked their prophets or the futile hairsplitting they were fond of. For example, the fats of camel or some portions of the slaughtered animal were prohibited for them. These prohibitions seemed by their very nature to be temporal

and to be terminated at a particular period of time. Since these prohibitions were against the human nature, therefore these were to be abolished in due course of time. The declaration of Islam that 'all the pure and nice things (*taibāt*) have been made lawful', abrogated all such restrictions.⁵

Moses and Jesus had already made allusions, in a very subtle way about this fact. The statements that are found in *Torah* in this regard are indicative of the fact that the Israelites were now reluctant of taking any further responsibility. Therefore, Allah had promised them that the prophet will be raised among their brethren and the religion will thus be completed by his prophethood.

The Qur'an also mentions this in the following verses:

He said: I smite with My punishment whom I will, and My mercy embraceth all things, therefore I shall ordain it for those who ward off (evil) and pay the poor due, and those who believe Our revelations; Those who follow the messenger, the Prophet who can neither read nor write, whom they will find described in the Torah and the Gospel (which are) with them. He will enjoin on them that which is right and forbid them that which is wrong. He will make lawful for them all good things and prohibit for them only the foul; and he will relieve them of their burden and the fetters that they used to wear. Then those who believe in him, and honor him and help him, and follow the light, which is sent down with him: they are the successful. (7:155-156)

The another aspect of the reply is that the abrogation is in consonance with the demands of the renovation of religion. Since the Jews and the Christians had forgotten a portion of their *Shari'ah* and from this forgotten portion whatever Allah liked was revived in the new Islamic religion so that the essential religious guidance which was lost because of the negligence of the custodians of divine law, will be made renovated in a preserved form and the portion of it which in the wisdom of Allah was regarded necessary, was removed therefrom and at its place equivalent and similar commandments were revealed.

The word *insa* has been used in the verse and attributed to Allah, and it

means that they were made to forget some portion of the divine book and this is according to the divine wisdom, as these people showed complete irresponsible attitude towards the Shari'ah law, therefore they were entitled to such treatment from their Lord. But since the *Shari'ah* of Allah is the common wealth of all the nations, people and communities of the world, therefore, as Islam perfected Shari'ah by the commandments which could meet the requirements of the particular period, in the same way, it also revived the forgotten commandments and neglected ones and provided the similar commandments on their place.⁶

The third aspect of *naskh* was in the context of purification of *Shari'ah*. Since the *Shari'ah* was made a target of several distortion, innovation, and embellishments by the innovators and misguided lots, the mention of which has been made in surah Hajj: "Never sent We a messenger or a Prophet before thee but when He recited (the message), Satan proposed (opposition) in respect of that which he recited thereof. But Allah abolisheth that which Satan proposeth. Then Allah establisheth His revelations. Allah is Knower, Wise."(22:52)

Seen from this angle *naskh* is a great means of checking and removing the innovations and falsehood that has been appended with the divine books and the religious *Shari'ahs* by the corrupted and misguided persons of all hues throughout the annals of history.

The prophets in every age have tried to remove these aberrations from the divine messages and purify and purge the *shari'ah* from all these innovations and to establish the actual divine writ. Most of the prophets who came to the fore before Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) were not bringing any new *shari'ah* along with them, and their mission rather being to renovate the earlier *shari'ahas* and purge these from all the embellishments and appendages attached to these by the unscrupulous people and bring them back to their original shape and form. The '*ulama*' are now responsible for purging the *shari'ah* from all possible innovations and accretions whatever may be there to bring the people to the pristine originality of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Islam made the correction in the spheres of the distortions which were made by the people of the book in the divine teachings and abrogated these aberrations and revealed the actual position of the divine writ.

In this way according to Amin Ahsan Islahî the mention found in the verse of

Surah Baqrah is all related to the earlier religions and it seems evident also as well. Discussing the subject of *naskh* in the context of the Quran, the author says, however, that in this respect there are three views. There is a group of people who not only believe in the abrogation rather stretch its use to a very vast area. Another group altogether denies any possibility of abrogation in this respect. Yet there is a third group of people which confines abrogation to only few verses or commandments of the Book.

The group of people who believes in the liberal sense of abrogation hold that we can accept *naskh* at all such places where some thing is making some other thing which is common specific or vice versa or makes any implicit as explicit. But on such occasions, according to the author, it is preferable to reconcile between common and specific or explicit and implicit commandments which can be easily affected.

About the second opinion that there is no *naskh* at all in the Quran, because the commandments of the *shari'ah* are dependent on the circumstances, and the commandments which have been abrogated have been abrogated because of the change in the circumstances during which these were revealed, in case the circumstances will be similar, in that case the same commandments will be applicable once again. In that case the commandments which are ostensibly abrogated are not in right sense of the word abrogated, but remain applicable in the similar conditions. The upholders of this view say that since the evolution of the Islamic *shari'ah* has had been gradually from the easier to the difficult commandments, therefore, whenever the circumstances demand to turn back to easier commandments, the turn to it will be an act quite in conformity with the nature of the *shari'ah*. But there are several flaws and inconsistencies in such a view point according to Amin Ahsan Islahî.

First this claim itself is not plausible that in the initial stage the Shar'iah was easier or lenient and later on it became tough. Because ponderous thought to the Qur'an shows that contrary to this viewpoint. There are several divine commandments which were difficult in earlier stage and later became easy and their evolution was from difficult to easy stage. For example the commandments about the prohibition of the wine and fasting show that there was evolution from

easier to difficult commandments but there are commandments which show that there was the reverse trend and the devolution was from difficult to easier ones. As for instance, the night prayer and the number of fighters in the Islamic war, whose number has been increased [from one against two and one hundred against two hundred instead of ten against one hundred and twenty against two hundred.] Moreover, in this case the conditions prevailing during the Prophet's day and our times have not been kept in view also. When the Prophet invited people to the religion of Allah, the Islamic teachings were totally new and strange, the number of the Companions was very limited also, people were immersed in the customs and rituals of the paganism, from which their freedom seemed most difficult. On the contrary our conditions are altogether different. Muslims are in millions in their numbers and the Islamic commandments are not strange or something unfamiliar to the believers. Therefore, under the analogy that the commandments of that period may be made applicable to the modern times is in no case feasible.

This view also invests credence to the deviations of the people who want concessions and are not serious in following the commands and dictates of the *shari'ah* due to the pervertedness of their natures and obliterated perception about religion. It will provide a safe passage for them and there will be no way to persuade them to follow the *shari'ah* commandments in this way. In modern times people under this plea will easily try to get concessions in respect of fasting, prayers, penalties for drinking alcohol and punishment for the fornication and adultery etc. (citing the analogy of earlier days of Islam in Mecca and Madina) under the guise of *ijtihâd* rendering the religious foundations vulnerable to all sorts of distortions and misrepresentations. Under such circumstances, like in the past the modern people are already trying to make such experiments. Under the disguise of such interpretations many innovators have tried to make lawful many a prohibited things by *shari'ah* and with the passage of time the very idea of the unlawfulness of these things has eluded these people.⁸

So far as the third view is concerned i.e. some of the Qur'anic verses are abrogated, seems most plausible. In this respect we can say that whichever commandment of the Qur'an is abrogated, the Qur'an itself abrogated it. Thus both the abrogated and the abrogating commandments are present in the Qur'an

itself. Because any commandment of the Qur'an could be abrogated by the Qur'an only. Some jurists think that the Qur'an could be abrogated by a Hadith also. But this view is not acceptable to Amin Ahsan Islahî.

Secondly, all such abrogation has taken place only in the context of the commandments (*ahkām*) not in the spheres of beliefs (*'aqā'id*) or in the fields of morality related items or qualities or basic truths and various episodes, (which are established beyond any shadow of doubt). Because these matters are not such in nature which could warrant any change or modification with the passage of time or changes in circumstances. But so far the change or modification in any commandment is concerned, and the Sovereign who wants to enact any such change or modification, it will not lead to any discrepancy at all, nor will it harm the spirit of the law, rather it may strengthen it.

Thirdly the abrogation does not take place for the reason that there was any lack on the part of divine law, which warranted the modification or change in previous laws or commandments. But it owes its enactment to the natural weaknesses and shortcomings on the part of servants rather, as some times they are in need of gradual process and steady implementation of commandment in order to become mature enough to become receptive to this or that law. Since Allah is the most gracious to His servants, therefore, He maintains this gradual process in the revelation of such commandments.

This process of gradual revelation has taken care of several things. For example, some times the initial conditions of the society were such that in the beginning of a particular commandment, only a general or specific command was made, but when the society reached its maturity, this initial and specific commandment was replaced by a more perfect and final verdict. For example, in the beginning for the safeguard of the rights of the inheritors, the commandment pertaining to will (*wasiyah*) was revealed, in the same way for controlling the adultery a pancayat type of penalty was recommended, or in the matter of making the fraternal bonds between the Ansar and Muhajirin, the brotherhood was given a legal touch apart from making it a moral bond as well. But when the Islamic society was established on the firm foundations and it had achieved the required vigour, the perfect and final commandments regarding the inheritance, penalty for adultery etc. were sent

to replace the earlier transitory and rudimentary guidelines.

In the same way, some times in accordance with the demands and requirements of human nature, the laws and their revelation was gradually controlled and maintained before reaching the people, to their completion where the human nature could imbibe those laws. A good example of that is the prohibition of the wine, which was very favourite to the Arabs. Therefore, in earlier phase its use was made unlawful at the times of prayers, in the same way the command of the observing fast was very difficult for the people of warm climate country like Arabia, therefore in the earlier stages the non-observance of fasting during a journey and sickness could be compensated by giving ransom. But once the people were getting patterned on the practice of these matters, the commandments pertaining to the complete prohibition of the wine or the full course of fasting was prescribed during Ramadan and the abolition of the provision of ransom was sent. However, in the exceptional cases the earlier commandments may remain also valid for the people who are entitled to the concessions under the *shari'ah* laws, with a very limited permission.⁹

Sometimes it also happened that the Prophet (ﷺ) was allowed to act upon the commandments of the earlier *Shar'iahs* for a time being, but later on this permission was abrogated and a new and permanent commandment was given within Islamic *shari'ah* itself. The glaring example of this matter can be seen in the change in the *qibla*. The purpose of such commandments was to put the Muslims to the test whether they are steadfast in their obedience to Allah and the Prophet or to their old and cherished traditions instead. This test was a type of training in itself.

In the same way sometimes, the circumstances demanded more stress on the aspect of perfecting the quality instead of quantity that despite the less number of the followers of Islam, they were prepared to take more responsibility on themselves and to enable them to do more work for the cause of Islam and nurture better talents thereof. In the earlier stages the Muslims were generally commanded to offer the mid night prayer (*tahajjud*) with out any discrimination, one believer was made entitled to fight ten infidels, before indulging in a private thing in charity secret talk with the Prophet to give something as a charity. But when the Muslims

increased in their numbers and the timely purification of the collective character of them was achieved in some degree, these matters were brought to the level of their general application, which was fixed for these in the *Shariah*.¹⁰

There are scholars like Abu Muslim Isfahani (Muhammad Ibn Bahr, d.323.A.H.), a Mutazilite and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan among others who do not accept the theory of abrogation of Qur'anic verses. According to Abu Muslim the abrogation is valid only in the context of the earlier revealed books like *Torah* and Gospel and their commandments like belief in the Sabbath or directing ones face towards east and the west while offering prayers. He says further that the claim of people that when the word *ayah* is used in its general sense we understand from it the verses of the Qur'an and nothing other than this, can be easily refuted as according to him, the word *ayah* is a common word and is applicable to all the arguments (not being confined to the Qur'anic verses only). In the same way Imam Fakhruddin Razi does not believe that this verse of Baqarah is definite in order to explain abrogation in the Qur'an, however he accepts the validity of the abrogation theory on the basis of another Qur'anic verses like "And when We put a revelation in place of (another) revelation, --and Allah knoweth best what He revealeth-- they say: Lo! Thou art but inventing. Most of them know not"(16:101) and "Allah abrogates and confirms what He pleases - with Him is the Master Copy of the Book." (13:39). However Sir Syed does not accept the possibility of abrogation in the Quran even on the basis of these verses quoted by Razi in support of his claim, though he thanks Razi for endorsing the view that this verse of Baqarah does not prove possibility of abrogation of the Qur'anic verses. Nevertheless, Sir Syed accepts the abrogation of the earlier books especially the *shari'ah* of Moses (*Shari'ah -Musawi*), which has now been replaced by *shari'ah* of the Prophet Muhammad (*Shari'ah-Muhammadiyah*) or in the words of Syed, "the commandments of the *Shariah* of Moses were changed into the *shari'ah* of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) or those orders of *shari'ah* of Moses which were forgotten by the Jews."¹¹

Since in the view of Sir Syed the tenacity of abrogation is not there, therefore no question arises about the abrogation of any of the Qur'anic verse by any Hadith which may even be most authentic and of collaborative nature.¹² However he

considers authentic Hadith entitled to serve as an explanation of the Qur'an.

Maulana Sanaullah Amratsari has brought a very important point to our notice that the significance of abrogation can only be understood in the context of reformation of society and individuals. Since the old and established customs or habits can not be eradicated in one go, therefore the reformer has to adopt a gradual and wise course for making reformation effective, however, the change in the prescriptions in this respect will never be tantamount to the shortcoming or lack of knowledge on the part of the reformer. He always remains knowledgeable about the conditions of the people who are prospective subjects of reformation. It actually is the matter of time, which is given full chance to facilitate the reformation, hence there remains scope for changing the prescriptions like a prudent physician who is every time conscious about the efficacy of the medicine he has suggested with a deep consideration of periodicity in the treatment. It may be valid only on the part of people for whom the reformation is applicable that they may take it final, but not the agent who is bringing about this reformation through the phased prescriptions in form of commandments. Giving some tenable instances the author says that in the initial stage of Islam, the Prophet (ﷺ) had prohibited people from visiting graveyards, but after reformation they were allowed to visit the graves. In the same way to curb the miserliness, people were commanded earlier not to keep the meat of animal sacrifices in their homes for more than three days, which was, however, allowed later on or the people were told not to use those utensils for the purpose of eating and drinking water, in which wine was served earlier, but later on they were permitted to use them. However, Maulana Sanaullah discourages those people who are in hurry and try to prove the abrogation of the Qur'anic verses in an unqualified manner. Therefore he recommends the study of Shah Wali Allah Delhvi's *Al-Faauzul- al Kabir*.¹²

According to Zamakhshari *naskh* means:

- 1 Any verse being abrogated in words.
- 2 Any verse being abrogated in recitation only
- 3 Any commandment being abrogated but the recitation of the verse remains in tact.
- 4 Recitation is abrogated but the commandment remains in tact.

5 Some times an addition is made on the verse that abrogates the verse, which is called by him as addition to the verse.¹³

Moreover according to Zamakhsharî only the Qur'an can abrogate. Qur'an as the purport and tone and tenor of the verse also indicates. However he believes that even a corroborative Hadith (*sunnat-i-makhsufah mutawàtirah*) can abrogate the Qur'an. So for *ijma*, *qiyas* or such a Hadith that is not categorical and certain can not be entitled to abrogate the verse of Qur'an.

Since the revelation of the Qur'an and sending of the *shari'ah* is full with the benefits for the servants of Allah, therefore some times abrogation becomes necessary, because what was beneficial yesterday may not be so today in changed circumstances. Allah is well aware about the welfare and needs and requirements of the creatures, He in His infinite wisdom changes one commandment by another. The basic motive behind *naskh* is to achieve some reformation or ease for people, and it is never fraught with difficulty or hardship (*mashaqat*) for them. It is for the same reason that the following three principles have been kept in view while making abrogation in the Qur'an.

- 1 A difficult verse or command has been abrogated by a simple one.
- 2 A difficult command has been abrogated by a difficult one.
- 3 A simple command has been abrogated by a simple command.¹⁴

Shah Wali Allah has written in his very important book *Al-Fauz Al-Kabîr Fi Usul al-Tafsîr* to deal with the problem of abrogation in the Qur'an, the most "difficult thing to deal with". However, according to him the usage of the word among the Companions was "grammatical" one, namely the removal of one thing by another. He says:

The meaning of abrogation, according to them, is removal of some of the qualities of one verse by some other verse whether the removal be due to the fact that the time for action upon the abrogated verse has come to an end or the reason may be the diversion of the speech from the unexpected meaning to the expected one, or because of the mention of some restriction which was only accidental or the reason may be the particularization of the general or the cause be the explanation of what differentiates the textual (*mansûs*) and the one

which is plainly anological or it may be due to the eradication of the pagan customs or the abrogation of the preceding law (*Shari'ah*). Thus, the subject of abrogation is very vast and it stands to reasoning and there is a scope for the difference of opinion about it. This is the reason why the commentators have taken the number of the abrogated verses to five hundred¹¹⁵

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