

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ABROGATION OF QURANIC VERSES

Lecture 16 in the Ramadaan series:

EXPLORING THE SHIA APPROACH TO THE QURAN

Wednesday 6 June 2018 (21 Ramadaan 1439)

at the Ahlul Bait (a.s) Masjid, Ottery, Cape Town

delivered by Mowlana Syed Aftab Haider

Thus far in this series we discussed in lecture 13 to 15 the issue of Tahrif (distortion) in Quran and gave a detailed response to the various key issues related to this topic.

In so doing we also responded to certain doubts which were raised about Tahrif and Shia being wrongly accused of believing in distortion of Quran.

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Written by ramadan
Monday, 11 June 2018 18:54 -

Tonight we will deal with a new, yet related chapter which is also a very important topic and that is the issue of "Abrogation in Quran" or "Naskh".

Scholars usually discuss the following three verses from the Quran when dealing with the principles related to this topic.

The first verse discussed is Surah Baqarah Verse 106 which states:

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"Whatever We abrogate of a verse or cause it to be forgotten, we bring a better or the like of it. Do you not know that Allah has power over all things? "

The second verse discussed is in Surah Nahl Verse 101 which states:

"And when We exchange a verse in the place of another verse, and Allah is well aware of what He sends down".

And the third verse that is usually discussed is from Surah Ra'd verse 39 which states:

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“Allah effaces out whatever He pleases and He confirms (similarly), and with Him is the Mother (Basic Source) of the Book.”

In summary, the principle that we learn from these verses is that Allah can create a command and then cancel it thereafter and this is then the subject of our discussion.

DEFINITION OF NASKH

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The question of what the term "naskh" as referred to in the verse 106 of Surah Baqarah means is the subject of much discussion.

From a literal perspective it means cancellation of something. For example, you write something and draw a line through it meaning that the order is cancelled.

For "naskh" to occur you need the "Naasikh" which means the abrogator and you need "Mansukh" which means the abrogated. Thus Nasikh comes second and Mansukh which is the abrogated comes first.

In the classical books of Islamic Sciences, Naskh is a very detailed discussion and the Scholars suggest that Imam Shafi'iy was the first one to deal with this subject in detail.

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REASON FOR ABROGATION IN LAW

Abrogation is something that happens in different systems of laws all the time. Example we approve a constitution of a country and later amend it. This amendment is usually introduced in relation to the date it occurred e.g. "Amendment 5 of 1999".

Why are laws amended?

This is usually due to a change in circumstances or the law itself is defective in that it has loopholes which prevent it from achieving its intended purpose or the law is downright unfair.

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With the conditions changing one realizes that the law in question is no longer appropriate and thus we change the law.

Why does this happen? Because the human being is the law maker and as a human being is entitled to error and thus can err in writing the law - in other words abrogation of a law is due to human ignorance.

If we consider the issue of a change in conditions, then again we see that human beings don't know the future and cannot see the change the future circumstances will bring and thus abrogate a law when such circumstances come to pass. Again abrogation of law for these reasons is due to human ignorance.

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The question then is what are the reasons for Naskh or abrogation of Divine Law? Allah is not entitled to error because He is not ignorant and even knows the future circumstances that will unfold and our changing requirements and needs.

Thus why abrogate or amend a law?? This is a serious question!!

ABROGATION OF THE LAW ABOUT DIRECTION OF PRAYER

The reason for the revelation of these verses on the subject of Naskh was that it occurred with the backdrop of evil Jewish propaganda against the Muslims.

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The Jews occasionally said that the true religion was the religion of the Jews and the real Qiblah was the direction that they used for their prayers. The evidence supporting their idea was that the Prophet of Islam (sawa) used to pray toward their Qiblah (Jerusalem).

But then the command came that the Prophet (sawa) had to change the direction of his prayers towards the Ka'ba in Makka.

We thus read in Surah Baqarah Verse 144:

"Turn then your face towards the Sacred Mosque and wherever you are, turn your faces towards it (for prayer)".

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When the command for changing the Qiblah from Jerusalem to the Ka'bah came down and Muslims had to pray toward the direction of Mecca (Ka'bah), this pretext was taken away from the Jews.

Therefore, they tried to assert a new pretext and said that if the first Qiblah was right, then what was the second instruction for?! And, if the second instruction was correct, then the Muslims' previous religious actions performed towards Jerusalem would be considered invalid.

So through this incident they wanted to say that abrogation of this law was proof that the Quran was a fabrication and not from God and was created by Prophet Muhammad (sawa) himself.

To respond to this false accusation, Surah Baqarah Verse 106 referred to above was revealed which sort to inform the Jews that they don't understand the meaning of Naskh in Sharia.

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And in Surah Baqarah Verse 142 we read:

"The fools among the people will say: 'What has turned them from their Qiblah (direction of prayer) which they were facing at.' Say: 'Allah's is the East and the West; He guides whoever He pleases to a straight way'."

So the background of abrogation in Divine Law is different to human law. Ayatullah Khoei explains this in the following manner:

"This kind of abrogation does not postulate a lack of wisdom in the Lawgiver's judgment. Moreover, from the occurrence of alteration does not spring that which is impossible in the case of God's actions. On the other hand, the instituted ordinance may be a real one; nevertheless, it gets abrogated after a while. This does not mean that the ruling, after being instituted, is rescinded with regard to the same conditions and the same matter (which is what would make it

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impossible of the All-Wise, who knows what comes to pass). Rather, it means that the instituted ordinance is limited to a specific time known to God but unknown to people, and that its termination is after the end of that time, because the term to which it is limited is over, and the end to which it is linked has been reached."

So the nature of command in the first case is that it is limited to a period of time. But the lawgiver who is Allah does not tell you from day one that it is limited for a period and thus for you it "appears" Allah changed his mind. There is NO abrogation in that sense in Quran (in the sense that Allah changed His mind). From day one it was to be like that with the intention that a subsequent law will replace it.

So in the case of the change in Qibla, Masjid Al-Aqsa was the direction towards which Muslims initially prayed for a certain number of months and which was always meant to be limited for a period of time though we don't know the exact reason for this arrangement.

However, Scholars say that since Islam started as a continuation of the mission of previous

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Prophets, thus Muslims initially shared the Qibla of the Jews. But once Islam was more established, there was a need to establish an independent position for Islam. Furthermore, the Ka'ba in the early days was full of idols and it was thus not appropriate to pray in that direction. There was thus a gradual intended process of bringing about this change.

POSSIBLE TYPES OF ABROGATION

Our discussion now moves to the three possible types of abrogation and the Shia and Sunni view on each possibility.

- The first type of abrogation to consider is the type where the recitation (means the actual verse no more constitutes part of Quran) as well as the actual law related to a verse was abrogated.

In other words, there was a verse which was originally part of the Quran and it's not any more

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part of the Quran, nor does its law apply any longer.

Shia scholars believe this type of abrogation did NOT occur while Sunni scholars are divided in their view in that some believe this type of abrogation did occur while others believe it did not occur.

The reason for this difference in view is due to how Sunni scholars approach the interpretation of certain narrations which suggest this idea.

For example, there is a famous Hadith recorded in Sahih Muslim which states:

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"Ummul Mu'mineen Lady Aisha reported that it had been revealed in the Holy Qur'an that ten clear sucklings make the marriage unlawful, then it was abrogated (and substituted) by five sucklings and Allah's Apostle (May peace be upon him) died and it was before that time (found) in the Holy Qur'an (and recited by the Muslims)."

The reality is that there is no such verse in the Quran, nor does the law of 10 sucklings apply as in terms of Sharia, a mere 5 sucklings creates the foster relationship.

So from a Sunni perspective they accept these narrations but explain that these type of ahadith refer to abrogation of these verses whereby the verse itself is not in the Quran any longer, nor the related law being applicable.

A critical point to realise from such an argument is that it suggests that our Quran does not have in it certain actual verses that were originally there!

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How did this verse go missing? There are other narrations of the above Hadith which suggest that this verse and the one related to "rajm" which refers to the stoning of adulterers was written on a page and eaten by a goat.

Sunni scholars dispute the authenticity of the version referring to the goat eating up the verse due to apparent weakness in its chain of narrators. While this explanation is acknowledged, it does not remove the belief that the verse actually existed as the other Ahadith quoted above are not disputed. Thus the explanation of abrogation is forwarded which is not shared by Shia scholars as it is tantamount to believing in Tahrif (distortion) of Quran but merely being explained away under the

heading of abrogation.

Similarly, there is a Hadith like this about "stoning the adulterers" which says that "if an old man (sheikh) and old woman (sheikha) commit adultery, stone them both".

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The exact wording is:

It is narrated from Aasim bin Bahdala, he from Zirr, he said: Ubayy bin Ka'b said to me; "How much of Surah Ahzab do you recite or how much do you count [its verses to be]?" Zirr said that he replied, "Seventy-three verses." Ubayy said; "Only this much, verily I use to see it and it was equal to Surah Baqarah and we used to recite in it, 'Whenever an aged man or aged woman commit fornication stone them as a punishment from Allah and Allah is All-Knowing, Wise.'"

It is thus claimed in the narration that this verse was part of Surah Ahzab which in its original form was the length of Surah Baqarah. Today we see that Surah Ahzab is perhaps a quarter the size of Surah Baqarah.

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This narration is more widely reported and thus, even though the chain of narrators is doubted by some scholars, the explanation again given is that even if this narration is true, that its absence from our Quran is due to abrogation.

- The second type of abrogation to consider is where no word or verse is removed from the Quran and only the law changed in that the original command does not exist anymore.

And in this regard there is agreement among both Sunni and Shia scholars that this did occur and that Surah Baqarah Verse 106 actually refers to this.

- The third type of abrogation to consider is where the recitation of the verse does not exist anymore, in other words the verse itself is not found in the Quran any longer BUT the related law still exists.

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In this regard, Shia scholars say that it definitely DID NOT occur while the majority of Sunni scholars say it definitely DID occur.

DOES ABROGATION INVOLVE "FORGETTING" A VERSE??

A related question is does abrogation involve "forgetting" a verse. For the same reasons explained above, Shia scholars view is that such a belief would amount to believing in Tahrif of Quran while Sunni scholars view is that it does not amount to Tahrif of Quran as the principle of Naskh encompasses this scenario too.

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That is due to their interpretation of a particular word in verse 106 of Surah Baqarah quoted above which is "nunsiha". The verse says:

"Whatever We abrogate of a verse or cause it to be "forgotten"...."

Based on this they believe that verses existed which Allah Himself erased from the memory of the Prophet (sawa) and thus from the people.

The question is does the Prophet (sawa) "forget" a verse after it was revealed to him? In terms of Surah A'la verse 6, this is not the case. It says:

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“We will make you recite, so you shall not forget”.

The objection then comes that verse 7 of the above mentioned Surah makes an exception. It says:

"Except what Allah pleases".

So this verse, after saying that Prophet Muhammad (sawa) never forgets a verse, seems to be making an exception that Allah CAN actually make him forget if He wishes.

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Allamah Tabatabai explains that this is still not the case as it only seeks to display the ultimate power of Allah with no intention of actualising it.

He then explains that it's like verses of the Quran making reference to your period of residence in Heaven which also has this "proviso" indicated in certain verses.

Example in Surah Hud Verse 108 we read:

“And as for those who are happy, they shall be in Paradise, abiding therein, so long as the heavens and the earth endure, except as your Lord pleases...”

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He then explains that "It just shows that Allah does have power to change the arrangement made; but all the Muslims agree that the people of the paradise will never be taken out of it. The same is the import of the exceptional clause, "except what Allah pleases".

Others understand the word "nunsuha" to mean "We delayed", in other words Allah delayed the appearance of a verse which would cancel an existing law.

Thus Shia scholars don't believe that verses that once upon a time existed are no more part of the Quran due to them being forgotten.

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POSSIBLE SCENARIOS OF THE ABROGATION OF A QURANIC ORDINANCE

So the next question then is how exactly does a law related to a verse of the Quran get abrogated?

Under this question there are three scenarios to consider.

The first is that the law related to a verse of the Quran is abrogated by another verse of the Quran.

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In this regard both Sunni and Shia scholars agree that this is not only possible but did actually occur.

The second scenario is that the law related to a verse of the Quran is abrogated by a Hadith that is reported through a single narrator ("Khabarun waahid") who is attributed to have heard it from Prophet Muhammad (sawa).

Both Sunni and Shia scholars agree that this is not possible and thus never occurred.

ABROGATION OF A VERSE OF QURAN BY MUTAWATIR HADITH

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The third scenario is that a law related to a verse of the Quran is abrogated by ahadith that reach the level of being mutawatir which means it is mass transmitted.

In this case some Sunni scholars and the majority among Shia scholars believe that this is THEORETICALLY possible.

The reason for this is that Allah can make a law directly through a verse of QURAN or through the instruction of Prophet Muhammad (sawa). In the Quran various verses reinforce this principle of the need to follow Prophet Muhammad (sawa).

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Example in Surah Ahzab verse 21 we read:

“Indeed in the messenger of Allah you have an excellent pattern (of conduct)”.

Or in Surah Najm Verse 3 and 4 we read:

"Nor does he speak of own desire.

His word is only a Revelation revealed to him."

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And in Surah Hashr Verse 7 we read:

"And whatsoever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatsoever he forbids you, abstain [from it]".

So if it can be proven that Prophet Muhammad (sawa) abrogated a law related to a verse of the Quran, then such abrogation is possible. HOWEVER, the majority from both schools of thought believe that this did not actually occur in practise.

HOW MUCH ABROGATION ACTUALLY OCCURRED?

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Scholars have done much research to determine how much abrogation of verses of the Quran actually occurred.

In this regard there are those who seem to take an extreme view and come up with very long lists of verses that have been abrogated.

However, Shia scholars generally believe very few verses were actually abrogated with the average view being around 5 verses whereas scholars like Ayatollah Khomeini even limit abrogation to having occurred only with respect to one verse of the Quran.

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To be continued....