

Fast 23: The doctrine of “abrogation” — 2

- The use of the word *naskh* or “abrogated” by Companions of the Holy Prophet about certain verses was sometimes **not meant** in the sense of abrogation of a verse by a later one, but its clarification or explanation. Sometimes it happened during the revelation of the Quran, that a verse was revealed and people did not understand some aspect of it and misinterpreted it. A later verse then clarified its meaning. This was not abrogation of the earlier verse, but abrogation of a certain wrong interpretation of it. Nonetheless commentators of the Quran called it *naskh*.
- An example of this is the following statement within ch. 2, v. 284:

<p>“And whether you manifest what is in your minds or hide it, Allah will call you to account according to it.” — ch. 2, v. 284</p>	<p>وَأِنْ تُبَدُّوْا مَا فِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَوْ تُخْفُوْهُ يُحَاسِبِكُمْ بِهِ اللَّهُ</p>
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According to a report in Sahih Bukhari, Ibn Umar said that these words were abrogated by the verse after it (hadith 4545 and 4546). We may reasonably ask: What is there in this verse to be abrogated? There is no command or permission in it which could be withdrawn. But what happened was that the Companions took it to mean that Allah would punish a person for every bad idea which entered his mind, even if he entertained it just momentarily and even if it was beyond his control that the idea entered his mind. V. 286 corrects such a view. It begins:

<p>“Allah does not impose on any soul a duty beyond its ability. To its benefit is what (good) it earns, and to its detriment is what (evil) it works.” — ch. 2, v. 286</p>	<p>لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا لَهَا مَا كَسَبَتْ وَ عَلَيْهَا مَا كَسَبَتْ</p>
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To control the entering of thoughts into an individual’s mind is beyond that person’s ability, so he cannot be held to account for such thoughts. It is added here that a person’s gain or loss is a result of his *actions*. This statement of v. 286 is described in Bukhari and elsewhere as “abrogating” (*naskh*) v. 284, when it is actually clarifying its true meaning.

- In fact, it did not need v. 286 to correct the misinterpretation of v. 284. A much earlier revelation, speaking of the good people, says:

<p>“Those who avoid the great sins and the indecencies, but the passing idea — surely your Lord is Liberal in forgiving. He knows you best when He brings you forth from the earth and when you are embryos in the</p>	<p>الَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ كَبِيرَ الْإِثْمِ وَالْفَوَاحِشَ إِلَّا اللَّيْمَ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ وَاسِعُ الْمَغْفِرَةِ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِكُمْ إِذْ أَنْشَأَكُمْ مِنَ الْأَرْضِ وَإِذْ أَنْتُمْ أَجِنَّةٌ فِي بُطُونِ</p>
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wombs of your mothers; so do not ascribe purity to yourselves. He knows him best who guards against evil.” — ch. 53, v. 32

أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ فَلَا تُزَكُّوْا أَنْفُسَكُمْ ۗ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنِ اتَّقَىٰ



This clearly states that the “passing idea”, the idea of committing some wrong, is forgiven. It goes on to say that God knows the inner nature of a person — that a person is a human being, having been brought forth from the earth, and has certain genetic pre-dispositions (referred to in the words “when you are embryos in the wombs of your mothers”). Due to these causes, he is bound to have frailties and weaknesses. It adds that no one should consider himself to be pure and immune from such weaknesses inherent within him.

- So *naskh* didn’t always mean abrogation. However, as Maulana Muhammad Ali noted in his book *The Religion of Islam*: “At the same time, it is true that the use of this 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.”
- Commentators of the Quran and Islamic scholars, without examining whether the concept of abrogation in the Quran was correct or not, took this idea further and even wrote that there were verses which were originally included in the recitation of the Quran but whose recitation was later abrogated, so that they were not included in the written texts of the Quran. They devised three categories of abrogated verses:
 1. Verses that were abrogated as regards their recitation and their commands.
 2. Verses that were abrogated only as regards their recitation but their commands remain in force. (Verses of these two categories are of course not in the Quran, as their “recitation” was allegedly abrogated.)
 3. Verses that were abrogated only as regards their commands but their recitation remains in force, i.e., they still remained in the written text of the Quran.

This is the conventional view of Sunni Muslim scholars, which is outlined in the 1981 popular book *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Quran* by Ahmad Von Denffer, himself a mainstream Sunni Muslim scholar who agrees with it. He gives an example of a verse for each of these three types.

- As to the first two categories, i.e., the existence of verses which were a part of the recitation of the Quran but whose recitation was later abrogated during the life of the Holy Prophet, so they were never included in the text of the Quran, this suggestion is contrary to the history of the recitation and collection of the Quran. Every verse was memorised and recited publicly by so many Companions of the Holy Prophet that it would be impossible to cancel the recitation of any verse. And the second category,

i.e., verses abrogated only for recitation but whose commands remained, and still remain, in force, is plainly absurd. If the command is meant to remain in force, why abrogate the recitation of the verse conveying that command? And if the recitation is abrogated, it will be understood by people that any command in it is also abrogated!

- The third category, that is to say, verses that are a part of the text of the Quran but considered to be abrogated by other verses, is the most relevant for a practical discussion. An example of it is given above, relating to ch. 2, v. 284, and another was given in the last Study relating to ch. 2, v. 184.