

## The Islamic doctrine of abrogation

Dean Esmay is still at it, busy muddying the waters about the principle of abrogation in the wake of his debacle at the hands of Michelle Malkin. Now, many people will no doubt ask me again: why are you bothering with him? The answer is that this really has nothing to do with him at all, but with people who are sufficiently clear-minded and objective to be able to consider the facts — and who, because they haven't had access to all the information up to this point, may think like Esmay, or be swayed by his arguments.

In responding to Bryan Preston's piece which touched on the Islamic doctrine of naskh, abrogation, Esmay says:

But, first off, please cite for me where the Koran says that a verse recorded later necessarily supercedes a verse recorded later. I don't think you can. (For that matter, find me that as a general Biblical principle.)

Aside from Esmay's incoherent request for a Qur'anic verse that says that what is written later cancels what is written later, there is a Qur'anic verse that says that when a verse is abrogated, the one that replaces it is as good as or better than the one it is replacing: "None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: Knowest thou not that Allah hath power over all things?" (Qur'an 2:106).

Thus we can see that abrogation, whatever particular form it may take, is indeed a Qur'anic principle — although not, of course, Esmay's caricature of it as some idea that what is later always and necessarily cancels what is earlier. Esmay then also asks for a Biblical verse supporting abrogation, but here is his first fallacy: if something is a doctrine in one religion, that doesn't mean it is a doctrine in another. I don't expect Buddhists to keep kosher, and I don't look for Christians to teach the doctrine of abrogation. So all of Esmay's lengthy *reductio ad absurdum* about Matthew and Mark, which I have not quoted here, is indeed absurd, but not in the way he wanted it to be.

If anything the Koran makes clear that it is whole and complete—which means that no later part can supercede any earlier part, or vice versa. The whole notion that "later is more important than earlier" is the sort of pseudo-logic that intellectual puffballs like Robert Spencer and Hot Air's Bryan trade in.

He is pretending that I have posited this as some sort of general principle of religion. Of course, I haven't, and neither has Preston. But more importantly, his claim that "no later part" of the Qur'an "can supercede any earlier part, or vice versa" is flatly contradicted by Qur'an 2:106, as well as by Qur'an 16:101: "When We substitute one revelation for another, — and Allah knows best what He reveals (in stages), — they say, 'Thou art but a forger': but most of them understand not." Note that 16:101, as well as 2:106, refers to the substituting of revelations — that is, words of Allah, and probably portions of the Qur'an (although the Hadith Qudsi are also considered to be divine revelation, on par with the Qur'an, but they constitute only a small part of the Hadith).

How does this work? Consider the verses about wine. In one place the Qur'an says that wine has "some profit" (2:219) for mankind, but elsewhere declares it an "abomination, of Satan's handwork" (5:90). Muslim scholars generally agree that the wine verses are a relatively clear instance of abrogation. Without abrogation, a pious Muslim would have to declare that "Satan's handiwork" offers "some profit" for mankind.

There is wide disagreement among Muslim theologians as to precisely which verses have been abrogated and which others have replaced them. Still, it has been a mainstream notion in Islamic theology that if a verse revealed at Mecca contradicts another revealed later at Medina, the Medinan verse takes precedence. In an earlier response to Esmay I explained how this principle of abrogation works for the Islamic teaching on jihad, and for general reference I will repost that material here, with some revisions.

Many traditional Islamic theologians and Qur'an commentators argue that violent material, such as sura 9, abrogates more relatively tolerant material such as sura 109. This is not a newly-minted view "cherry-picked" by Osama bin Laden; it is in fact a very ancient view. When discussing why Muhammad didn't begin sura 9 with the customary invocation *bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim*, "in the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful," an intriguing answer comes from a Qur'an commentary that is still highly valued today in the Islamic world, *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*. This is a fifteenth-century work by the renowned imams Jalal al-Din Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Mahalli (1389-1459) and Jalal al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Abi Bakr al-Suyuti (1445-1505). The invocation, suggests this *tafsir*, "is security, and [Sura 9] was sent down when security was removed by the sword."

Security's removal by the sword meant specifically the end of many treaties the Muslims had made with non-Muslims. Another still-influential Qur'an commentator, Ibn Kathir (1301-1372) quotes an earlier authority, Ad-Dahhak bin Muzahim, to establish that the Verse of the Sword, sura 9:5 ("slay the unbelievers wherever you find them") "abrogated every agreement of peace between the Prophet and any idolater, every treaty, and every term." He adds from another authority: "No idolater had any more treaty or promise of safety ever since Surah Bara'ah was revealed." And yet another early commentator, Ibn Juzayy (d. 1340) agrees that one of this verse's functions is "abrogating every peace treaty in the Qur'an."

This idea is crucial as a guide to the relationship of the Qur'an's peaceful passages to its violent ones. Suras 16, 29, 52, 73, and 109 — the sources of many of the Qur'an's verses of peace and tolerance — are all Meccan. That means that many Muslims, guided by commentators such as those above and the imams who teach from them, see these suras only in light of what was revealed later in Medina. Being the last or next-to-last sura revealed, sura 9 is generally understood as being the Qur'an's last word on jihad, and all the rest of the book — including the "tolerance verses" — must be read in its light.

Ibn Kathir states this explicitly in his commentary on another "tolerance verse": "And he [Muhammad] saith: O my Lord! Lo! these are a folk who believe not. Then bear with them (O Muhammad) and say: Peace. But they will come to know" (Qur'an 43:88-89). The commentator explains that "say Salam (peace!) means, 'do not respond to them in the same evil manner in which they address you; but try to soften their hearts and forgive them in word and deed.'" However, that is not the last word on the subject. As Ibn Kathir notes: "But they will come to know. This is a warning from Allah for them. His punishment, which cannot be warded off, struck them, and His religion and His word was supreme. Subsequently Jihad and striving were prescribed until the people entered the religion of Allah in crowds, and Islam spread throughout the east and the west."

In other words, Muhammad gave peace a chance, with the pacific suras, and then understood that jihad was the better course.

This view is also echoed by Muhammad's first biographer, the eighth-century chronicler Ibn Ishaq, as well as by another Islamic theologian, Ibn Qayyim, who is invoked by the twentieth-century jihadist Sayyid Qutb in support of the same view. And a modern-day Chief Justice of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh 'Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Humaid, has taught that in the Qur'an, "at first 'the fighting' was forbidden, then it was permitted and after that it was made obligatory." He also distinguishes two groups

Muslims must fight: “(1) against them who start ‘the fighting’ against you (Muslims) . . . (2) and against all those who worship others along with Allah . . . as mentioned in Surat Al-Baqarah (II), Al-Imran (III) and At-Taubah (IX) . . . and other Surahs (Chapters of the Qur’an).” (The Roman numerals after the names of the chapters of the Qur’an are the numbers of the Suras: Sheikh ‘Abdullah is referring to verses such as 2:216, 3:157-158, 9:5, and 9:29.)

This understanding of the Qur’an isn’t limited to the Wahhabi sect, to which Sheikh ‘Abdullah belongs. The Pakistani Brigadier S. K. Malik’s 1979 book *The Qur’anic Concept of War* (a book that made its way to the American mujahedin Jeffrey Leon Battle and October Martinique Lewis, and which carried a glowing endorsement from Pakistan’s then-future President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, who said that it explained “the ONLY pattern of war” that a Muslim country could legitimately wage) delineates the same stages in the Qur’anic teaching about jihad: “The Muslim migration to Medina brought in its wake events and decisions of far-reaching significance and consequence for them. While in Mecca, they had neither been proclaimed an Ummah [community] nor were they granted the permission to take up arms against their oppressors. In Medina, a divine revelation proclaimed them an ‘Ummah’ and granted them the permission to take up arms against their oppressors. The permission was soon afterwards converted into a divine command making war a religious obligation for the faithful.”

The three-stage theory of the revelations about jihad, culminating in the command to fight to impose the Islamic social order over the world, is bound up with abrogation, as the earlier stages give way to the later. This is the view of Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Qayyim, Ibn Kathir, the compilers of the *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, and a host of other traditional and mainstream Muslim commentators. Here is a brief contemporary Muslim explanation of the principle. Only Dean Esmay thinks I made it up.

Source: <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2006/10/the-islamic-doctrine-of-abrogation.html>