

In this article, Dr Zakir Naik argues that abrogation does not eliminate previous verses by the revelation of a latter verse. Instead, both verses are a part of the Qur'an and can be used depending on the situation.

The theory of abrogation.

1. Two different interpretations

The Glorious Qur'an says in the following verse:

“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?” [Al-Qur'an 2:106]

A reference to this is also made in chapter 16 verse 101 of Surah Nahl. The Arabic word mentioned is ayat which means 'signs' or 'verses' and which can also mean 'revelations'. This verse of the Qur'an can be interpreted in two different ways:

The revelations that are abrogated are those revelations that were revealed before the Qur'an, for example the Torah, the Zaboor and the Injeel.

Here Allah (swt) says that He does not cause the previous revelations to be forgotten but He substitutes them with something better or similar, indicating that the Torah, the Zaboor and the Injeel were substituted by the Qur'an.

If we consider that the Arabic word ayat in the above verse refers to the verses of the Qur'an, and not previous revelations, then it indicates that none of the verses of the Qur'an are abrogated by Allah but substituted with something better or similar. This means that certain verses of the Qur'an, that were revealed earlier were substituted by verses that were revealed later. I agree with both the interpretations.

Many Muslims and non-Muslims misunderstand the second interpretation to mean that some of the earlier verses of the Qur'an were abrogated and no longer hold true for us today, as they have been replaced by the later verses of the Qur'an or the abrogating verses. This group of people even wrongly believe that these verses contradict each other.

Let us analyze a few such examples.

2. Produce a recital like the Qur'an / 10 Surahs / 1 Surah:

Some pagan Arabs alleged that the Qur'an was forged by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Allah (swt) challenges these Arabs in the following verse of Surah Al-Isra:

“Say: If the whole of Mankind and Jinns were together to produce the like of this Qur'an they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support.” [Al-Qur'an 17:88]

Later the challenge was made easy in the following verse of Surah Al-Hud:

“Or they may say, “He forged it.” Say, “Bring ye then ten Surahs forged, like unto it, and call (to your aid) whomsoever ye can, other than Allah, if ye speak the truth!” [Al-Qur'an 11:13]

It was made easier in the following verse of Surah Yunus:

“Or do they say, “He forged it”? Say: “Bring then a Surah like unto it, and call (to your aid) anyone you can, besides Allah, if it be ye speak the truth!” [Al-Qur’an 10:38]

Finally in Surah Al-Baqarah, Allah (swt) further simplified the challenge:

And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a Surah like thereunto; and call your witnesses or helpers (if there are any) besides Allah if your (doubts) are true.

But if ye cannot – and of a surety ye cannot – then fear the Fire whose fuel is Men and Stones – which is prepared for those who reject faith”. [Al-Qur’an 2:23-24]

Thus Allah (swt) made the challenges progressively easier. The progressively revealed verses of the Qur’an first challenged the pagans to produce a book like the Qur’an, then challenged them to produce ten Surahs (chapters) like those in the Qur’an, then one Surah and finally it challenges them to produce one Surah somewhat similar (mim mislihi) to the Qur’anic Surahs. This does not mean that the later verses that were revealed i.e. of Surah Baqarah chapter 2 verses 23 and 24 contradict the earlier three verses. Contradiction implies mentioning two things that cannot be possible simultaneously, or cannot take place simultaneously.

The earlier verses of the Qur’an i.e. the abrogated verses are still the word of God and the information contained in it is true to this day. For instance the challenge to produce a recital like the Qur’an stands to this day. Similarly the challenge to produce ten Surahs and one Surah exactly like the Qur’an also holds true and the last challenge of producing one surah somewhat similar to the Qur’an also holds true. It does not contradict the earlier challenges, but this is the easiest of all the challenges posed by the Qur’an. If the last challenge cannot be fulfilled, the question of anyone fulfilling the other three more difficult challenges does not arise.

Suppose I speak about a person that he is so dumb, that he would not be able to pass the 10th standard in school. Later I say that he would not be able to pass the 5th standard, and further say that he would not be able to pass even the 1st standard. Finally I say that he is so dull that he would not even be able to pass K.G. i.e. kindergarten. One has to pass kindergarten before one can be admitted to school. What I am stating is that the person is so dull as to be unable to pass even kindergarten. My four statements do not contradict each other, but my last statement i.e. the person would not be able to pass the kindergarten is sufficient to indicate the intelligence of that person. If a person cannot even pass kindergarten, the question of him passing the first standard or 5th or 10th, does not arise.

3. Gradual prohibition of intoxicants

Another example of such verses is that related to gradual prohibition of intoxicants. The first revelation of the Qur’an to deal with intoxicants was the following verse from Surah Baqarah:

“They ask thee concerning wine and gambling say: ‘In them is great sin, and some profit, for men; but the sin is greater than the profit’.” [Al-Qur’an 2:219]

The next verse to be revealed regarding intoxicants is the following verse from Surah Nisa:

“O ye who believe! approach not prayers with a mind befogged, until ye can understand all that ye say” [Al-Qur’an 4:43]

The last verse to be revealed regarding intoxicants was the following verse from Surah Al-Maidah:

“O ye who believe! intoxicants and gambling, (dedication of) stones, and (divination by) arrows, are an abomination of Satan’s handiwork; eschew such (abomination), that ye may prosper.” [Al-Qur’an 5:90]

The Qur’an was revealed over a period of 22½ years. Many reforms that were brought about in the society were gradual. This was to facilitate the adoption of new laws by the people. An abrupt change in society always leads to rebellion and anarchy.

The prohibition of intoxicants was revealed in three stages. The first revelation only mentioned that in the intoxicants there is great sin and some profit but the sin is greater than the profit. The next revelation prohibited praying in an intoxicated state, indicating that one should not consume intoxicants during the day, since a Muslim has to pray five times a day. This verse does state that when one is not praying at night one is allowed to consume intoxicants. It means one may have or one may not have. The Qur’an does not comment on it. If this verse had mentioned that one is allowed to have intoxicants while not praying then there would have been a contradiction. Allah (swt) chose words appropriately. Finally the total prohibition of intoxicants at all times was revealed in Surah Maidah chapter 5 verse 90.

This clearly indicates that the three verses do not contradict each other. Had they been contradicting, it would not have been possible to follow all the three verses simultaneously. Since a Muslim is expected to follow each and every verse of the Qur’an, only by following the last verse i.e. of Surah Maidah (5:90), he simultaneously agrees and follows the previous two verses.

Suppose I say that I do not live in Los Angeles. Later I say that I do not live in California. Finally I say, I do not live in the United States of America. This does not imply that these three statements contradict each other. Each statement gives more information than the previous statement. The third statement includes the information contained in the first two statements. Thus, only by saying that I do not live in the United States of America, it is obvious, that I also do not live in California nor New York. Similarly since consuming alcohol is totally prohibited, it is obvious that praying in an intoxicated state is also prohibited and the information that in intoxicants is “great sin and some profit for men; but the sin is greater than profit” also holds true.

4. Qur’an does not contain any contradictions

The theory of abrogation does not imply that there is a contradiction in the Qur’an, since it is possible to follow all the verses of the Qur’an at the same time.

If there is a contradiction in the Qur’an, then it cannot be the word of Allah (swt).

“Do they not consider the Qur’an (with care)? Had it been from other than Allah, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy (contradictions).” [Al-Qur’an 4:82]