

## Suratul Baqarah: Verses 106 107

(١٠٦) مَا نَنْسَخْ مِنْ آيَةٍ أَوْ نُنسِهَا نَأْتِ بِخَيْرٍ مِنْهَا أَوْ مِثْلَهَا أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

(١٠٧) أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ضِمْ وَمَا لَكُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ

**Whatever signs We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring one better than it or like it. Do you not know that Allah has power over all things?** (106).

**Do you not know that Allah's is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and that besides Allah you have no guardian or helper?** (107).

### Commentary

The verses deal with the subject of abrogation. The word, abrogation, when used as a term of Islamic *fiqh*, means as follows: To show that the time of an order has come to its end; that it is no more valid, is no longer in force. This definition is based on the above verse; and is one of the manifestations of its connotations.

**Qur'an: Whatever signs We abrogate...** “an-Naskh” (النَّسْخُ) is removal, to remove, to annul. The Arabs say: *Nasakhati 'sh-shamsu 'z-zilla* (نَسَخَتِ الشَّمْسُ الظِّلَّ) = the sun removed the shadow). Allah says:

**And We did not send before you any apostle or prophet, but when he desired, the Satan made a suggestion respecting his desire; but Allah annuls that which the Satan casts, then does Allah**

**establish His signs; and Allah is Knowing, Wise** (22:52).

Also, they say: *Nasakhtu 'l-kitab* ( نَسَخْتُ الْكِتَابَ ) = I copied the book); it is as though the writing was removed and its place changed. That is why another verse uses the word “*at-tabdil*” ( التَّبْدِيلُ ) = to change) in place of abrogation:

**And when We change** (one) **sign for** (another) **sign, and Allah knows best what He reveals, they say: “You are a forger”. Nay, most of them do not know** (16:101).

Abrogation, however, does not entail obliteration of a verse, turning it into a non-being. Its only effect is the cancellation of the order which the verse had promulgated. It should be noted that the Qur'anic verse has been described as a “sign”, that is, a mark that points to another thing – a verse is a sign pointing to a Divine Command.

The second verse, “**Do you not know that Allah's is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth...**”, gives the reason as to why Allah abrogates some Qur'anic verses.

All these factors indicate that abrogation removes a verse as far as its quality as a sign, as a symbol, is concerned. When abrogated, the verse remains in existence as before, but loses its quality as a sign – no longer does it point to an order, as the order is now cancelled.

The next phrase, “or cause to be forgotten”, clearly supports the foregoing explanation. “*al-Insa'*” ( الْإِنْسَاءُ ) is to make one forget, to erase out of memory, to eradicate from knowledge. By putting the two phrases side by side, the Qur'an makes it clear that abrogation entails erasure of a verse's effect, while “*al-insa'*” causes eradication of the verse itself from the memory.

Symbolism – the quality of being a sign of something – varies with various signs having various aspects and directions. The Qur'anic verses are the signs of Allah because the *jinn* and the men are jointly and severally unable to bring its like; the rules ordained by Allah are His signs inasmuch as they create piety in man and bring him nearer to his Lord; every created thing is His sign, because it, by its existence, proves the existence of its Creator, and by the qualities of its being, leads to His attributes and names; the prophets and the friends of Allah are His signs inasmuch as they, with their words and deeds, call the humanity to Allah, and so on and so forth. Consequently, a sign may be great or small, strong or weak; that is why Allah says:

**Certainly he saw of the greatest signs of his Lord** (53:18).

Also, a sign may contain only one aspect of symbolism, and another may comprise of various such aspects. The former, when abrogated, is obliterated in its entirety, is completely destroyed. But in the case of the latter, it is possible to abrogate only one aspect of its symbolism, leaving the other ones intact; for example, a Qur'anic verse could be abrogated as far as its law was concerned, and yet continue as a Divine Sign because of its eloquence and miraculous qualities.

This generalized meaning of abrogation has been inferred from the reasoning given in the second verse: “Do you not know that Allah's is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth...” There are only two objections possible against the factuality of abrogation; or, as the reports say, these were the two arguments advanced by the Jews against it.

First: A sign given by Allah contains an actual benefit which cannot be obtained from any other thing. If that sign is abrogated, its inherent benefit would be lost; nothing could take its place to preserve that benefit. Allah is not like His creatures, nor is His knowledge like theirs. His knowledge does not change with the changes in external factors.

It is not that one day He knew one thing and issued an order according to that knowledge; then next day the knowledge changed and He became aware of another factor which He did not know before, and therefore He had to cancel the previous order, replacing it with a fresh one.

Such inconsistency is not worthy of Divine Sublimity. Of course, it is all right for us mortals, because we cannot comprehend all the aspects of an affair; and as a result of this incomplete knowledge, our decisions are frequently changed and amended. But we should not compare Divine Knowledge without limited and defective perception.

Here it is necessary to point out that such an objection arises from a notion that the power of Allah is neither comprehensive and all-encompassing nor unrestricted and unconditional.

Second: Accepted that the Divine Power is all-encompassing and limitless. But once a thing is created it goes beyond the sphere of that power, and cannot be changed. Even in our case, we have power to do or not to do a certain work – so long as we have not done it; but once we have done it, it becomes an essential being, and goes beyond the limits of our power.

This argument is based on the rejection of the all-encompassing ownership of Allah; it presupposes that once Allah has managed a certain affair in a certain way, He cannot change that arrangement in another way. This Jewish belief is portrayed in the verse:

***And the Jews say: “The hand of Allah is tied up” (5:64).***

Allah replies to the first objection with the question: “Do you not know that Allah has power over all things?” He certainly has power over all things. Therefore, He may replace a sign with an equally good or even a better sign.

The second objection is dealt with by the next question: “Do you not know that Allah's is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and that besides Allah you have no guardian or helper?”

Allah is the Owner of the heavens and the earth; He can do whatever He likes with His property. No one besides Him owns any thing; otherwise, that owner could interfere in the management of Allah or put restriction on His authority and control.

None else owns any thing – neither in his own rights nor even when Allah gives to him a partial ownership. When we transfer the ownership of a property to another person, the transferee gets all the rights which we had in that property, and our rights are rendered null and void.

But when Allah gives a property into someone's possession, Allah's ownership of the property is not disturbed in any way – it does not come to an end, is not even diminished. He continues to be the real Owner and Controller of the property which He has given to others. His is the unrestricted ownership and unconditional management.

If we look at what He has put under our ownership – with-out our having any independent authority over it – then He is our Guardian. And if we look at the apparent independence enjoyed by us, with His grace – although it is a poverty in the shape of plenty, a dependence disguised as independence – then too we cannot manage our affairs without His help; and He is our Helper.

The above explanation is based on the sequence and style of the two verses. First, there is the exclusivity of the declaration: “Allah's is the kingdom...” Then there is the sequence: “Do you not know that Allah has power over all things?”

Do you not know that Allah's is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth...?” The two sentences have not been joined with any conjunctive, a sure indication that each is independent of the other, and that the first sentence deals with one objection and the second with another.

The last sentence, “and that besides Allah you have no guardian or helper”, gives a finishing touch to the above replies: Even if you are oblivious of Allah's all-encompassing power and ownership, and are looking at this nominal ownership of yours, you will know that it is not a permanent or independent ownership; you cannot manage it independently; you need a guardian to look after your interests – and Allah is that guardian. He can and does manage your affairs and your property as He likes.

On the other hand, if your eyes are so fixed on this possession as to make you forget your dependence; if you think that you are the independent and absolute owner of your property, even then you will have to admit that you cannot manage your own affairs, cannot obtain the results you want, without the help and assistance of a super power.

And Allah is your real Helper; it is He who manages your affairs and your property for you. From whatever angle you look at this matter, Allah's power over all things and His ownership of every thing remain unchallenged and undisputed. “and that besides Allah you have no guardian or helper”: Apparently it should have been 'besides Him.'

Then why did the Qur'an use the noun instead of the pronoun? It was to indicate that the foregoing sentences contain the complete replies, and this sentence is not their integral part; rather it is an independent declaration to strengthen those replies.

This discourse leads us to the following conclusions:

First: Abrogation is not a thing confined to only the religious laws; it holds its place in the sphere of creation too.

Second: Abrogation cannot take place without two sides: (i) The abrogated thing or verse, (ii) the abrogative, that is, the thing or verse that abrogates.

Third: The abrogative contains all the benefits and the perfection that was found in the abrogated thing.

Fourth: Although the abrogative differs from the abrogated in its form, both have one thing in common – the perfection and the benefit. When a prophet dies and another is sent in his place – and both of them are the signs of Allah, one abrogating the other – it takes place in total conformity with the natural system. Life, death, sustenance and other such things often replace each other, the succeeding factors abrogating the preceding ones.

It all depends on the varying needs of the society's welfare, on ever-changing level of the man's perfection. Like-wise, when a religious law is replaced by another, the abrogating one has the same power as the abrogated one had, to lead to the spiritual and temporal well-being of the individual and the society; each perfectly suitable for the time it was, or is, in force; each more beneficial in the context of its time.

For example, the order to “forgive” in the beginning of the call when the Muslims had neither the manpower nor the armaments, and the command to “fight” when Islam had gained some strength, when the Muslims had gathered enough force and the disbelievers and the polytheists were frightened of them. However, seldom is an abrogated verse devoid of some phrase showing that it was a transitory order which would be abrogated in due course.

For example: The verse:

***But pardon and forgive*** (them) ***until Allah should bring about His command*** (2: 109),

which was abrogated by the verse of fighting; and:

***... confine them until death takes them away or Allah makes some way for them*** (4: 15),

which was abrogated by the verse of flogging. The phrases, “until Allah should bring about His command”, and, “or Allah makes some way for them”, give clear indication that the order given therein was temporary and transitory which would soon be abrogated.

Fifth: The relation between the abrogative and the abrogated is quite different from that which is found between a general statement and a particular, between an unconditional clause and a conditional, or between an unspecified proposition and a specified.

What removes the apparent contradiction between the abrogative and the abrogated, is the society's and the individual's good and well-being which is found in both of them. But the apparent contradiction between a general statement and a particular, between an unconditional clause and a conditional, or between an unspecified proposition and a specified, emanates from the strong (or weak) manifestation of the intended meaning.

The true intention of the speaker is reflected much more strongly and clearly in a particularized statement, a conditional clause and a specified proposition; and that strength and clarity removes the above-mentioned apparent contradiction – by explaining the general in the light of the particular, the unconditional with the help of the conditional and the unspecified in the frame of the specified.

These things are the subject of the Principles of Jurisprudence. The same applies to the decisive and the ambiguous verses, as we shall explain under the verse:

**... of it there- are some verses decisive, they, are the basis of the Book, and others are ambiguous...** (3:7)

**Qur'an: or cause to be forgotten:** “Nunsiha” ( نُنْسِيهَا ) is derived from “al-insa' ” (to cause to be forgotten; to erase from memory or knowledge), as we have described earlier. It is a general and unconditional statement.

It is not restricted to the Apostle of Allah (S); nay, it does not include him at all. Allah had said about him:

**We will make you recite so you shall not forget, except what Allah pleases** (87:6 -7).

It is a Meccan verse, while the verse of abrogation is of Medina period. Obviously the Apostle could not forget anything after the promise of Allah, “so you shall not forget”.

**Question:** This claim is untenable because the promise has the proviso, “except what Allah pleases”. It means that the Apostle (S) could forget what Allah was pleased to make him forget.

**Reply:** Such exceptional clauses serve only to emphasize the power of Allah; they do not necessarily mean that the thing mentioned in that clause would actually take place. Look for example at the verse:

**... they shall be in the garden, abiding in it as long as the heavens and the earth endure, except as your Lord pleases...** (11:108).

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”, in this verse.

Moreover, if the said clause were to prove that the Prophet (S) could actually forget the things taught by Allah, depending on the pleasure of Allah, there would be no sense in putting him under obligation by

promising him, “you shall not forget”.

Any human being who remembers any thing, or forgets it, does so by the pleasure of Allah. The same is true about the animals who remember and forget by His pleasure and decree. And the Prophet too, before this promised grace of Allah, remembered by the pleasure of Allah, and forgot by the pleasure of Allah.

What new grace was added here if the promise meant only a quality which the Prophet had already had? If that promise were to make any sense, it would have to mean that the Prophet could never forget anything, although Allah had full power to make him forget.

Some people have recited the word as “*nansa'aha*” ( نَنَسَّأَهَا ), derived from “*an-nas'*” ( أَلْنَسَّأُ ) = to delay). According to this recitation, the meaning would be as follows: Whatever signs We abrogate by nullifying it, or put it off by delaying its appearance, We bring one better than it or like it, and the Divine management in advancing something or putting it off, does not diminish its perfection or benefit.

The fact that the Divine Management always brings out a thing's perfection and benefit, is inferred from the clause, “We bring one better than it or like it”. The goodness emanates from the perfection of a thing or benefit of a laid down rule.

The abrogated thing or rule was surely good; and the abrogating thing or rule too is at least as good, if not better. So, every Divine Management is the ideal of goodness, perfection and benefit.

## Traditions

Innumerable traditions have been narrated by both sects, from the Prophet (S), his companions, and the Imams of his *Ahlu 'l-bayt*, that there are abrogated and abrogating verses in the Qur'an.

The Commander of the faithful ('Ali – a.s.) said, after enumerating various abrogated and abrogating verses: “And the word of Allah:

***And I did not create the jinn and the human beings except that they should worship Me*** (51:56)

was abrogated by His word:

***and they shall continue to differ, except those on whom your Lord has mercy; and for this did He create them*** (11:118 – 119),

that is, for the mercy did He create them.” (*at-Tafsir*, an-Nu'mani).

The author says: In this tradition the Imam has used the word, abrogation, in a wider sense than its terminological meaning. The latter verse mentions a reality which restricts the reality described by the former. The first verse affirms the Divine Worship as the purpose of creation.

While doing a work, Allah keeps a purpose in view; and He cannot be defeated in His purpose. On the other hand, he has decreed that they should choose their own path, and consequently some of them progress on the right path, while others go astray.

Those who by their own choice choose the path of guidance are covered by the mercy of Allah, and it is for this mercy that He has created them. In this way, the second verse affirms another purpose for the creation: The mercy which accompanies the worship and guidance.

This goal is reached by only a selected few, while the first verse had affirmed a goal for all the *jinn* and the men, and that is the Divine Worship. Some people are created for some others, and those others for yet others; this chain continues till it reaches the group which sincerely worships Allah.

Looking from this point of view, it is easy to understand why all the *jinn* and men have been said to be created for the worship. We plant a garden and nurse the trees for their fruits. The real purpose is the fruits, but the trees and their branches and leaves are planted, protected and looked after because they are the means to get the fruits. And it will be quite right to say that the garden's purpose was its fruits.

In the same way, the second verse “abrogates” the generality of the first verse, focusing its sight on the true worshippers who are the recipients of the mercy of Allah.

The same book narrates from the same Imam that he said: “And the word of Allah:

***And there is not one of you but shall come down to it; this is a decided decree of your Lord*** (19:71),

was abrogated by His word:

***Surely (as for) those whom the good has already gone forth from Us, they shall be kept far off from it; they will not hear its faintest sound, and they shall abide in that which their souls long for. The great fearful event shall not grieve them*** (21:101–103).”

The author says: It must be noted that the relation between these two verses is not that found between a general declaration and a particular one. The first verse says that it is a decided and unavoidable decree of Allah; and such a decree cannot be rendered null and void, it cannot be cancelled. What the “abrogation” mentioned in this tradition means will be explained, God willing, in the exegesis of the verse 21:101, mentioned above.

al-Baqir (a.s.) said: “Among the (various types of) abrogation is *’al-bada’*”<sup>1</sup> ( أَلْبَدَاءُ ) contained in the word of Allah: ***Allah effaces what He pleases and establishes (likewise), and with Him is the basis of the Book (13:39)***; and (demonstrated in) the saving of the People of Yunus.” (al 'Ayyashi)

**The author says:** Its reason is clear. Some traditions of the Imams of the *Ahlu 'l-bayt* (a.s.) count the death of an Imam and his being succeeded by another Imam as an example of the abrogation.

**The author says:** We have already explained this matter. The number of the traditions containing this theme reaches to nearly *mutawatir*.

'Abd ibn Hamid, Abu Dawud (in his *an-Nasikh wa 'l-mansukh*) and Ibn Jarir have narrated from Qatadah that he said: "(During the lifetime of the Prophet) a verse used to abrogate (another) verse; and the Prophet of Allah used to recite a verse, and a chapter, and as much as Allah wished of a chapter, then it was raised (i.e. erased) and Allah caused His Prophet to forget it.

So, Allah said narrating it to His Prophet: ***Whatever signs We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring one better than it;*** He says: There is (some) ease in it, some allowance in it, some order in it, (and) some prohibition in it." (*ad-Durru 'l-manthur*)

The author says: The same book quotes numerous traditions on the theme of "causing to be forgotten"; but all of them have to be discarded because they go against the teaching of the Book of Allah, as we have explained in the meaning of this word.

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1. al Bada' (الْبَدَاءُ) is a terminology of Shi'ite theology. It means that Allah makes known His plan to His chosen servants only to that extent which is beneficial to the mankind or which is necessary to make a test meaningful.

When the time comes when the angel, Prophet or Imam concerned thinks that the plan of work is coming to its end, a new development extends the plan or brings it to an unexpected end. The saving of the People of Yunus and the intended sacrifice of Isma'il are among its examples. (tr.)

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