

USUL UT-TAFSIR-THE PRINCIPLES OF HERMENEUTICS

SESSION #4

In Session #3, the *mubayyin* (clear and unambiguous) and *mujmal* (that which is elucidated by other texts) were examined, in which we benefited from greatly. One of the most important types of texts that we would now like to use and understand is that of *naskh*. This very word contains some of the bedrock that our creed is based upon in Islam. We then would like to define the principle, then give examples of it.

PASSAGES OF NASKH (ABROGATION)

The word **naskh** originates from the Arabic word, *nasakha*, meaning to ‘abrogate, invalidate, revoke, supersede, repeal, replace or withdraw.’ This is the purely linguistic meaning of the word.

In the Shari`a it carries specific implications that should be known by the believer, so as to effectively implement the knowledge.

Imaam al-Khatib al-Baghdaadi RH defines this word,

In the Revealed Law, *naskh* has the same meaning as one of the forms of *naskh* in the Arabic language, this being the present, established judgment being superseded by a judgement coming after, for if this had not happened, the first judgement would have remained in place.

[al-Faqih wal-Mutafaqqih, V. 1, pp. 80-81]

Shaikh ul-Islam Muwaffaq ud-Din RH stated,

Naskh in the Revealed Law has the meaning of when the ruling on something is removed or eliminated. So the removal of the established, present judgement in speech is superseded by speech that revokes and unbinds it.

[Rawdat un-Naazir wa Junnat ul-Munaazir, V. 1, pp. 218-219]

Imaam Ibn Badraan al-Hanbali RH informs us,

Naskh in the language of the Shari`a is the elimination of the present established ruling by way of a text like it that revokes and loosens it.

[al-Madkhal, pp. 214-215]

The foundation for what *naskh* represents has not been set. In addition to that, there is another point to also keep in mind. The science of abrogation has two forms, the **naasikh** and the **mansukh**. The *mansukh* is the thing that has been abrogated or is no longer binding and the *naasikh* is the thing that has abrogated the *mansukh* or rendered it no

longer binding. We will try to use this vocabulary throughout so as to familiarise the reader with it.

Allah has indeed stated in His Revelation that abrogation takes place. Let us listen to Him explain this situation,

Allah wipes out what He wills and establishes what He wills. And He possesses the substance of the Book.

[Surat ur-Ra'd (13), ayah 39]

Whatever verse We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring a better one or similar to it. Do you not know that Allah is able to do all things?

[Surat ul-Baqarah (2), ayah 106]

And when We change one verse in place of another-and Allah knows best what He has sent down-they say, 'You are a forger.' On the contrary, but most people do not know.

[Surat un-Nahl (16), ayah 101]

From this we then know that Allah abrogates some of His Revelation in place of others and most people truly do not understand the affair at hand. We will, insha'allah, visit this principle further later.

ARE THERE DIFFERENT TYPES OF NASKH (ABROGATION)?

If someone looks carefully into the issue of abrogation, they can see that there are different forms of abrogation. Imaams al-Khatib al-Baghdaadi¹, Ibn `Atiyyah al-Andalusi^{2 3}, al-Hussain al-Baghawi,^{4 5} Ibn al-Jawzi,^{6 7} Muwaffaq ud-Din, al-`Izz ibn `Abdus-Salaam,^{8 9} Najm ud-Din at-Tufi¹⁰ and Ibn Badraan¹¹ all say that Naskh has three types:

1. Abrogation of the ruling on an issue, but the preservation of its' wording in the text. This means that a particular verse has been abrogated by way of its' judgement, but the verse or verses remain established in the text and are not removed.

...the bequest is to go to the parents and next of kin...

[Surat ul-Baqarah (2), ayah 180]

So when we look, in the beginning of Islam, the will and bequests went for the parents and the next of kin. But some time later, that was abrogated by,

¹ Al-Faqih wal-Mutafaqqih, pp. 80-85

² Mawsu`at ut-Tafaasir Fil-Muharrir il-Wajiz, p. 122

³ d. 541 AH/1146 AD. A high ranking Maaliki scholar of Spain, hailing from the city of Granada, he wrote an authoritative tafsir that is still used today by students in the Muslim world and the West.

⁴ Mawsu`at ut-Tafaasir Fil-Ma`aalim it-Tanzil, p. 56

⁵ d. 516 AH/1122 AD. Given the name 'Reviver of the Sunna,' this high ranking Shaafi`ii scholar was known for his strictness in applying Islam, humility with the laity as well as upright character in narrating ahaadith and exegesis of the Qur'an.

⁶ d. 597 AH/1201 AD. A Shaikh ul-Islam of his time and one of the senior Hanbalis of Iraq, this Orthodox master of all disciplines had lectures attended by some 100,000 or more people every week. He was indeed a sign of Allah and a lover of his Lord. He was also one of the best students of Imaam `Abdul Qaadir al-Jilaani RH. While in his youth, he memorised more than 100,000 ahaadith and the Qur'an in his youth. A direct descendant of Sayyiduna Abu Bakr RAA and a best friend to Imaam Muwaffaq ud-Din RH, he brought over 10,000 people into Islam with his hands. He wrote over 300 books and was a senior theologian of high standing in the seminary that he founded.

⁷ Mawsu`at ut-Tafaasir Fi Zaad il-Masir fi `Ilm it-Tafsir, pp. 80-81

⁸ 660 AH/1262 AD. A Shaikh ul-Islam of his time and a reviver of Islam in his time, this Damascene heresiographer and master senior theologian is one of the great spiritual fathers of Muslim Orthodoxy.

⁹ Mawsu`at ut-Tafaasir Fi Tafsir il-Qur'an, pp. 35-36

¹⁰ Sharh Mukhtasar Rawdah, V. 2, pp. 320+

¹¹ al-Madkhal, pp. 214-222

There is a share for men and a share for women from what is left by parents and those nearest related kin...

[Surat un-Nisaa' (4), ayah 7]

This ayah then made it necessary for the parents as well as other members in the family to be entitled to a share in the inheritance.

There is also the passage,

And those of you who die and leave wives behind should bequeath for their wives a year's maintenance and residence without turning them out...

[Surat ul-Baqarah (2), ayah 240]

In the Days of Jaahiliyyah, when a husband used to die leaving a wife behind, she would remain in the family home for one year before leaving the residence. She would have to be supported with maintenance as well as given board for that time. She could also not be re-married in that time. Allah allowed this practice to continue until it was time to be abrogated, at which time He said,¹²

And those of you who die and leave wives behind them shall wait four months and ten days...

[Surat ul-Baqarah (2), ayah 234]

This allowed the mourning period to be shorter, the wife to re-marry sooner as well as her to leave the residence if she chooses.

2. The wording of a ruling in the text is abrogated, but the ruling remains in place and in effect. Thus, a verse would be revealed, but then its' wording in the text would be lifted while the ruling and meaning remained established in the hearts of the Muslims.

An example of this is what took place with regard to the verse of stoning. The first text revealed regarding adultery was,

So restrain them to their homes until death overtakes them.

[Surat un-Nisaa' (4), ayah 15]

This was making reference to adulterous people and what should be done. These people were not allowed to mix in the community nor among other believers and were only allowed out for their basic necessitates. They would remain in a state of exile until Allah swt would send down further legislation on the issue at a time that He willed. When the rule was sent, it was the following,

¹² Mawsu`at ut-Tafaasir Fi Zaad il-Masir fi `Ilm it-Tafsir, pp. 148-149; Mawsu`at ut-Tafaasir Fil-Ma`aalim it-Tanzil, pp. 138-139

The man and woman that commit adultery, both of them should be stoned to death.

[Collected by al-Bukhaari, V. 12, pp. 128-131, Muslim, hadith #1691]

But the text of this ruling was lifted and left in the hearts of the Muslims. Allah knew that the Muslims would always remember this ruling and that the Ummah would be infallible in preserving this principle. This principle on the punishment for adultery was so widespread, that it would become mass transmitted. It is of course truly miraculous that this rule was preserved, but Allah would know this, as he promised that this Ummah was infallible in its' unity,

And whoever follows a path other than that of the Messenger and the believers, we will turn him over to what he is on and roast him in the Fire. And what an evil home coming that is!

[Surat un-Nisaa' (4), ayah 115]

The Prophet Muhammad saw said about this Ummah,

'You must stay with as-Sawaad ul-A`zam (the Great Majority).'

[Majma' az-Zawaa'id, V. 1, pg 179, al-Haakim in al-Mustadrak, V. 4, pg 430 al-Baihaqi in al-Madkhal, pgs. 34 and 35, Tarikh Baghdaad, V. 13, pgs. 307 and 311 and al-Faqih wal-Mutafaqih, V. 1, pgs. 179 and 180. Also taken from al-F tisaam, V. 2, pgs. 458+; Fa'id ul-Qaadir, V. 5, p. 347 and classed by them as hasan]

'Whatever the Muslims see as good, Allah indeed sees it as good. And whatever the Muslims see as sin, Allah indeed sees it as sin.'

[Ahmad in his Musnad, V. 1, p. 379, Majma' az-Zawaa'id, V. 1, pp. 88, 177 and 178]

Although Allah abrogated the text of the ruling, he kept it among the body of the Muslims as a mass transmitted fact as well as in our history books.

3. The final type of ruling is the abrogation of the ruling as well as its' wording in the text. In this case, the actual verse or verses are lifted and their judgement is also no longer applied.

An example of this type of abrogation is when the Prophet Muhammad saw, received his revelation in the Sunna to face Masjid al-Aqsa. When the time came, he was ordered by Allah with the following ayah that abrogated the one before,

So turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Masjid wherever you are, turn your face in its' direction.

[Surat ul-Baqarah (2), ayah 144]

The general revelation for the Messenger of Allah saw in the beginning was to inform the people not to associate facing a direction with salvation. For this reason, in prayer he chose to face Masjid al-Aqsa. Then after this incident, the ayah above took effect.

IS THERE AN NASKH (ABROGATION) FOR EVERY SINGLE THING?

Indeed, abrogation is only in things such as halaal, haraam, and blameworthy customs and so on. There is no abrogation in doctrine, for example the Unicity of the Lord, the infallibility of the prophets and so on. Thus, the principle of the Oneness and Unicity of Allah was never different. It has always remained the same,

And We sent to every nation a messenger stating, ‘Worship Allah and avoid false gods...’

[Surat un-Nahl (16), ayah 36]

When we think of certain essentials of faith such as Allah, His Angels, His Books, His Messengers, Salvation, the Day of Resurrection and other such time honoured truths, these do not fall under the umbrella of things that can be abrogated for later generations.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE QUR’AN?

At this point, someone could ask, how could the Qur’an have abrogation if it is the Word of Allah? Could it not just be stated once and then that is it? These questions are valid, but an important point has to be kept in common. Allah has revealed these particular laws in a way that is called progressive revelation. This is where He has revealed a series of laws over time as the people were ready and could bear the matter. There are examples, not just in the Qur’an, but in previous revealed laws of abrogation in the messages of the prophets before, such as

- a. The children of the Prophet Adam AS were allowed to marry amongst themselves, but among us today, such a thing is classed as incest and impermissible. Why? Due to abrogation.
- b. The Prophet Ya`qub AS married two sisters, something expressly forbidden to Muslims, but this was before this principle was abrogated.
- c. Prostration as a form of greeting was allowed in the times of the prophets of old, but is impermissible in the Shari`a of all times given by the Prophet Muhammad

SAW.

We should then understand that abrogation is as ancient as revelation itself, without any doubt. It should not be a point of doubt, but rather something that increases our faith, as it rightly demonstrates and shows Allah as the Lord and Creator of History and Knower of all.

COULD ALLAH ORDAIN SOMETHING ONE MOMENT BUT THEN ABROGATE IT RIGHT AFTER?

Allah has used this very method to test many of the righteous throughout history. This is a fact and one of the best examples of that is the following story of the Prophet Ibrahim AS with his son,

...He said, ‘O my son. I see in a dream that I am slaughtering you. What do you think?’ He said, ‘O father! Do what you have been commanded and if Allah wills you will find me patient.

Then when they both submitted to the matter and he laid him on his forehead, We called out to him, ‘O Ibrahim!’ You have fulfilled the dream! Indeed We do reward those who do righteousness.

That was truly a clear test and We ransomed him with a great sacrifice.

[Surat us-Saafaat (37), ayaat 102-107]

You should notice that the Prophet Ibrahim AS had been ordered to sacrifice his son, but before he could do it, he had passed the test and the command was repealed. Thus the point of the command was not the order itself but the willingness to obey and heed the order. And this is most assuredly how we should try to conduct ourselves, sacrificing in all ways and manners possible.

WHAT ARE SOME SIGNS THAT WE COULD LOOK FOR TO TELL WHEN SOMETHING IS ABROGATED?

There are some signs that indicate abrogation that will help us in our journey down the road of hermeneutics. In finding two passages that order two things, or perhaps one forbids something and another seems to permit it, to understand what is naasikh and what is mansukh, we should look for the following signs,

1. That the wording actually states it or calls for it. In the Qur’an, we have this in an example from the Prophet `Isa AS to the Children of Israel,

And I have come confirming that which was before me of the Torah and to make lawful for you part of what was forbidden you and I have come to you with a proof from your Lord.

[Surah Aali `Imraan (3), ayah 50]

The same ruling exists in the ahaadith as when the Prophet SAW said,

I used to forbid you from visiting the graves. Now do so!

[Collected by Imaams Muslim, hadith #977, Abu Dawud and at-Tirmidhi who classed it as sahih]

2. If the statement is being related, the narrator should mention the time of his/her hearing it, so that one may actually ascertain the status of naasikh or mansukh. So

if someone were to say, 'I heard it said on the Day of the Conquest of Makkah,' we would know for a surety that this ruling would abrogate what came before it.

3. The Ummah must agree that particular ruling is mansukh (abrogated) and that the new ruling is naasikh (abrogating and superseding it).
4. The actual narrator states the naasikh and the mansukh. For example, there is the hadith of Salamah ibn al-Akwa` where he said,

The Messenger of Allah allowed us the dispensation of mut`ah (marriage while on war) in the year of the campaign of Awtaas three times, then he forbid us.

[Collected by Imaam Muslim, hadith #1,404 and classified as sahih]

5. One of the texts has a clear indication that it is more recent than the other. One such text would be the following,

Freedom from all obligations is declared by Allah and His Messenger to those of the idol worshippers whom you made a treaty.

[Surat ut-Tawbah (9), ayah 1]

In the ahaadith, it could be an example where one of the narrators knew the Prophet saw longer than the other or where one of the companions only knew him a short time and died or the other may have only heard a partial conversation.

And as a last point, but certainly not the least, is that if you are unsure, ask and find out so that you might be enriched and learn. Do not make a judgement if you are unsure or the texts do not seem absolutely unambiguous.

We should always be sincere in prayer in asking for the help of Allah and His Safety from going astray. When we approach the Qur'an, we should do so in a state of reverence, hoping to understand the revelation at a deeper level. And may Allah make us of those who truly implement his word.

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