

The Esoteric Significance of Abrogation in Sacred Scripture

By Mahmoud Bina and Alireza K. Ziarani

Every sacred Scripture contains statements that supersede others in the same Scripture in their literal meaning. This phenomenon is known as “abrogation” and is met with in the sacred texts of all traditions in one form or another. While the existence of these apparent contradictions poses a challenging question to the theologians who find themselves charged with the task of defending the logical consistency of the words of God, in reality it furnishes keys to a profound truth that surpasses the plane of theological elaborations. As we shall see in what follows, the question of abrogation is explained by differences in the degree of universality among the verses that seem to be contradictory to one another. The apparent contradictions thus met with in the sacred Scripture of one and the same religion refer to multiple dimensions of truth, at different degrees of universality, which are superimposed on one another.



It may be appropriate to begin the discussion by making brief references to the notion of abrogation in the religions and by offering a few examples taken from their sacred texts.

Islam offers an example of a dogmatic system where the notion of abrogation is recognized in principle and is dealt with in fact. The principle of abrogation is enunciated in the Koran itself, notably in the “verse of abrogation”:

We do not abrogate a verse nor cause it to be forgotten except that we bring (in its stead) one better or the like thereof. Knowest thou not that God hath power over all things?¹

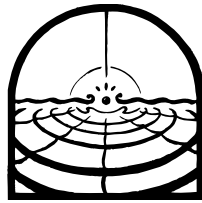
¹ Koran 2:106.

Leaving aside certain marginal currents in the history of Islam, we find a general consensus among orthodox Muslims as regards the primary intention of this verse. According to this generally accepted understanding, there are verses in the Koran that annul others, the former being referred to as the “abrogating verses” and the latter as the “abrogated verses.”

In this context, let us remark in passing on a particular interpretation of the verse of abrogation that is found in certain exegetical texts and which relates to a perceived idea of the annulment of ancient traditions by later religions. According to this opinion, this verse speaks of the Divine Will that brings about successive religions one after another over time, in a nearly linear fashion, each religion abrogating the ones preceding it. While it is true that by revealing successive religions, Providence adapts the one universal and primordial religion to the varying condition of humanity over time, this truth cannot be construed as a total abolition of all the divinely-instituted religions that were alive at the time of the advent of Islam, a thesis that would be utterly refuted by many Koranic verses that testify to the contrary² as well as by the general understanding of the prominent companions of the Prophet of Islam who did not demand a forced conversion from the followers of the orthodox religions in the lands they conquered after the life of the Prophet—including, notably, from the Buddhists, whose non-theistic theology was not particularly easy to understand for the Muslims and who were not explicitly cited in the Koran among the “People of the Book.” That Providence has allowed the replacement of ancient, now extinct, Greco-Roman religion, for example, by the Semitic religions is true enough, but it constitutes no scriptural basis for the Muslims to reject the validity of the great world religions that were generally

² See, for example, Koran 2:62, 3:113-114, 3:199, 5:46-47, 5:69, and 7:159; see also Koran 2:148 and 49:13 for the principle of diversity of peoples and religions.

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