

Abrogation: The Key to Understanding Islam

Understanding the Doctrine of Abrogation is fundamental to understanding the Koran and Islam. In order to understand abrogation, we must first get a basic understanding of the Koran.

The Koran

The Koran is the sacred book of Islam, and it is considered by Muslims to be the infallible, pure word of Allah, eternal and perfect, and the Koran in Arabic is an exact copy of the book that Allah has beside him in Paradise. The verses of the Koran were delivered through the angel Gabriel to the final prophet Muhammad in a series of "revelations." Muhammad started receiving such "revelations" in 610 and they continued until his death in 632.

The Koran has 114 chapters (*suras*). However, they are not arranged in chronological order. With the exception of the first chapter, they are rather arranged generally by the length of the chapter, with the shortest chapters coming at the end. For example, the first chapter, *Al-Fatihah*, has only seven verses, while the second, third, and fourth chapters have 286, 200, and 176 verses, respectively. Translations of the Koran usually indicate whether a chapter was "revealed" in Mecca (*Makkah*) or in Medina. In the Koran you will also find that the chapters of the earlier "revelations" from Mecca are

interspersed among chapters of the later "revelations" from Medina.

There is an important significance to where a verse or chapter was "revealed." While in Mecca, the religion of Islam was just starting and it was generally not well received. Perhaps as a result of this, the verses of the Koran "revealed" in Mecca were generally more peaceful and accommodating toward non-Muslims than the verses later "revealed" in Medina. The verses from Medina have a general tendency to be more belligerent and intolerant, and more inclined to make sharp differentiations between Muslims (believers) and non-Muslims (disbelievers).

Abrogation

This led to a conflict between the message of a Meccan verse and that of a Medinan verse addressing the same general topic. But how can there be such a conflict if the Koran is the infallible, eternal, "revealed" word of Allah? This was covered in a Medinan verse in the Koran that introduced the concept of "abrogation":

Chapter 2, Verse 106

Whatever a Verse (revelation) do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring a better one or similar to it. Know you not that Allah is Able to do all things?

Abrogation therefore means that if there is a conflict between the messages of two "revelations" in the Koran, then the most recent "revelation" is the one to be followed. Consequently, a "revelation" made in Medina would supersede a similar, earlier "revelation"

made in Mecca if there was a conflict between the two.

So What about the "Peaceful Verses" in the Koran?

Chapter 9 of the Koran is titled *At-Taubah* (The Repentance), although it is also known as *Al-Bara'ah* (The Immunity). Ibn 'Abbas, a noted early Muslim scholar, said that Chapter 9 was meant to "humiliate" the non-Muslims (*Sahih Muslim*, No. 3031). It was also the last complete chapter to be "revealed" to Muhammad before he died. So according to the Doctrine of Abrogation, this chapter is the final word on the matters it covers. Let's look at some of those matters:

Chapter 9, Verse 5 - The "Verse of the Sword"

Then when the Sacred Months have passed, then kill the Mushrikun wherever you find them, and capture them and besiege them, and lie in wait for them in every ambush. But if they repent [by rejecting Shirk (polytheism) and accept Islamic Monotheism] and perform As-Salat (the prayers), and give Zakat (obligatory charity), then leave their way free. Verily, Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

A *Mushrikun* is in essence any non-Muslim. With this verse Allah commanded the Muslims to kill, capture, besiege, and ambush the non-Muslims *wherever you find them*.

Chapter 9, Verse 29

Fight against those who believe not in Allah, nor in the Last Day, nor forbid that which has been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger (Muhammad), and those who acknowledge not the religion of truth (i.e. Islam) among the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians), until they pay the Jizyah with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.

With this verse the Muslims were commanded by Allah to fight against the Jews and Christians until they pay the Jizyah with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued. The Jizyah is a tax imposed by Islam on all non-Muslims living under the “protection” of an Islamic government.

Chapter 9, Verse 63

Know they not that whoever opposes and shows hostility to Allah and His Messenger, certainly for him will be the fire of Hell to abide therein. That is the extreme disgrace.

So those who disagree with and/or show hostility toward Allah and Muhammad are destined for the Fires of Hell.

Chapter 9, Verse 73

O Prophet (Muhammad)! Strive hard against the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and be harsh against them, their abode is Hell, - and worst indeed is that destination.

Muslim scholars interpret this verse as a command to Muslims to fight against, and be harsh toward, disbelievers.

Chapter 9, Verse 123

O you who believe! Fight those of the disbelievers who are close to you, and let them find harshness in you; and know that Allah is with those who are Al-Muttaqun (the pious [believers of Islamic Monotheism]).

In discussing this verse our modern *Tafsir Ahsanul-Bayan* pointed out:

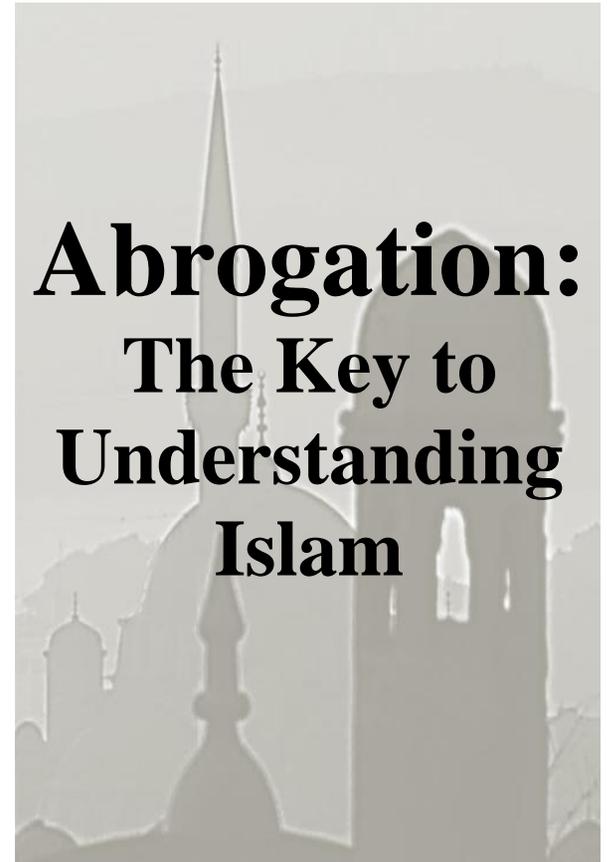
The verse sets an important rule for strategy for jihad: Muslims should fight those disbelievers first who are close, followed by those who are further, then the next, and so on, in the same order. This is what the Messenger of Allah did.

Tafsir Ahsanul-Bayan, Vol. 2, p. 425

This *tafsir* (p. 426) also pointed out that when dealing with disbelievers, "the Muslims should not be soft or lenient, but harsh to them."

So what about the “peaceful verses”? They are in the Koran because Muslims believe them to be the words of Allah. However, according to the Doctrine of Abrogation, they are no longer commands for Muslims because they have been replaced by verses such as we see in Chapter 9 of the Koran, the last chapter to be “revealed.”

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Part of a series on Islam

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