

Demythologizing the Qur'an Rethinking Revelation Through Naskh al-Qur'an

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Abstract

This article posits two important claims. One is that *naskh al-Qur'an* is a real and actual phenomenon. Early sources from the Muslim classical era have been cited to justify this claim. The other is that, the notion and theory of *naskh al-Qur'an* allow for our rethinking of revelation in Islam.

The theoretical discourse of *Naskh al-Qur'an* hinges on the basic idea and principle of the legal annulment of the law contained in or implied by a particular Qur'anic verse that has since been declared as abrogated. While the Qur'anic theory of abrogation may be about the law, in essence, it is as much about the meanings and dynamics of revelation in Islam. Various processes may be identified with the theory of *naskh*. Most notably are the processes of "re-revelation" and "revelatory alignment".

Re-revelation, or *revelatory revision* or *realignment* is something to be appreciated. These terms imply *adaptation*. Through highlighting textual instances in the Qur'an, this paper intends to demonstrate that Qur'anic revelation apparently came down not in isolation but in tandem with the interests and altering dynamics of an emerging and developing community.

This idea of revelatory adaptation has far reaching consequences. At the theological level, it impacts on the current established notion of the immutability of the Qur'an. It in turn signifies the significance of *naskh* in determining the direction of *fiqh* and *tafsir*, and in revealing to us the theological nature of *wahy*.

At the interpretive and more practical level, it influences the way the law may be understood and applied in Islam. Most importantly, at the philosophical level, it *demythologizes* the Qur'an.

This paper is a preliminary attempt at reassessing the notion of *wahy* in Islam. It proposes a paradigm shift in the way we look at the Qur'an and the way we understand revelation in Islam.

Keywords: Wahy; Nakh al-Qur'an; Qur'anic abrogation; re-revelation; revelatory alignment; revelatory adaptation

Introduction

Demythologization is a stylized terminology that has acquired its early significance in modern Biblical scholarship. Its currency could be traced back to the German Protestant New-Testament scholar, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), who first introduced the term in the context of Biblical hermeneutics. By distinguishing between *Historie* ("objective, factual accounts of historical events") and *Geschichte* ("the meaning that people choose to give to those events"), Bultmann appropriated 'demythologization' in order to render the interpretation of the New Testament free from so-called 'pre-scientific' imageries (Jean-Loup Seban, 1998). Since 'demythologization' presupposes our dealing with "mythology" or "myth", it signifies our attempt at the "decoding of myth or the reinterpretation of ancient mythical patterns of thought" found in a text, into "contemporary thought patterns" (Alfred Glenn, 1973: 73). In other words, while *demythologization* may be understood as an act of deconstruction

or a *demythification*, in essence, it is simply *reinterpretation*. Reinterpretation is significant and becomes necessary if only because meanings embedded in historical texts require extraction and translation in terms that are credible and understandable to us today.

Two things however need to be borne in mind in our use of “demythologization” within the context of this paper. The first is that, *mythology* is used here to mean what Karen Armstrong describes as “the imaginative expression of religious truths,” (1994: xxii; 2000: 9 ff.). In this sense, it has a very positive connotation. Bultmann shares this idea. Myth, to him, is important and that it expresses truth. But the truth we find in myth, he intimates, is “clothed in the symbolic language of ancient thought-patterns.” Not unlike Hans Georg Gadamer, Bultmann further argues that inasmuch as myth is important, demythologization or reinterpretation is necessary in order that modern man could “grasp its truth” (Glenn, *ibid.*). This assumption appears logical to him given that truth is unchanging. On the other hand, humans and their historical situations in which they apprehend truth change (Glenn, 76; Gadamer, 1998: 267-74).

The idea of truth as something unchanging may equally be applied to divine truth. Yet divine truth demands of itself something more than just ‘simple truth’. It gives us the direct sense of timelessness and normativeness. At the same time however, scriptural texts from where divine truths are derived and apprehended have to be interpreted according to contemporary thought-pattern, lest their meanings become obscure, and the truth for which we seek eludes us. What it means here is that, *demythologization* in relation to sacred texts refers to and emphasizes less of the mythical nature of the texts, but more of the need to apprehend and embrace the truths that are to be found in them, and that this could only be achieved through unpacking and deconstructing the mythological narratives.

Secondly, by *demythologization*, this paper does not purport to bog itself down with the

cultural and intellectual baggage that connotes the kind of conditions that have confronted the Christians in their biblical hermeneutical tradition. Both the Qur’an and the Bible had separate and distinct experiences and traditions in their conception and developmental histories. On the contrary, ‘*demythologization*’ is here used simply as a loose term to imply both the act and the process of treating and rendering the Qur’an as a text that is both divine and mundane in nature rather than letting it be regarded as strictly “other-worldly” and “un-in-touch” with the events that took place during the history of its descent the way it has been rigidly understood and treated today. To every Muslim, the Qur’an is certainly divine, and as such, transcendent, for the simple fact that it is a direct revelation from God. This notion is indisputable and taken for granted. It is for this that the Qur’an has been rigidly construed as immutable and untouchable. What is less realized and therefore unfortunately unappreciated is the fact that the Qur’an is nevertheless also mundane for the very earthly dimension that characterizes its developmental history. In this last sense, the use of ‘*demythologization*’ as a technical terminology in our dealing with the Qur’an presupposes the fluidity in the way the Qur’an should have been theologically and philosophically understood. It presupposes as well that our existing framework of theological interpretation and understanding of revelation in Islam requires our reappraisal and re-appreciation.

This paper intends to show that the Qur’an, as a repository of divine revelation in Islam, is much more fluid in nature and character than the Muslims had ever given it credit. The present attempt is exploratory and preliminary in nature, but it seeks to demonstrate such fluidity through the argument of *naskh al-Qur’an* and the history and nature of the text of the Qur’an. As far as *naskh* goes, this paper argues that the phenomenon of *naskh al-Qur’an* is a historical reality and that its occurrence speaks for the flexible nature of revelation or *wahy* in Islam, and that *naskh* in the Qur’an could be traced back to the origin and development of

the Muslim literary genre on *naskh* and our study of the alleged instances of *naskh*. As for the history and nature of the text of the Qur'an, it will be shown that the Qur'an permits itself to be grounded and associated with the mundane situations on the ground during the process and development of its revelation more than Muslims today would allow and give it latitude. What is important as an outcome of this modest study is the impact that the shift in our interpretation and understanding of revelation will have on our appreciation of the Qur'an and the Islamic law today.

The Theory of *Naskh al-Qur'an*

The much celebrated 11th Century Benedictine monk and Archbishop of Canterbury, St. Anselm of Aosta (1033–1109), famous for his ontological argument about the existence of God, once conceptualized that “God is something than which nothing greater can be thought.” Through this proposition, he posits the relationship between thought and existence. The bottom line of his argument is that the very fact that we possess the idea of God in our thought points to God's real and actual existence. Otherwise, how could we have thought of an existent prior to its actual existence? By the same token, the idea of *naskh al-Qur'an* could not have existed unless *naskh* truly exists. We therefore begin with a brief survey of some of the early works on *naskh al-Qur'an*. The study of these selected sources is relevant and significant not only to the extent that it provides us with a preliminary sketch of the history and development of the doctrine, but also as evidence and testimony to the very fact that the phenomenon of *naskh al-Qur'an* is real and did in fact exist in the revelatory history of the Qur'an, and that the theory is a justification of it.

Selected Early Works on *Naskh*: A Critical and Historical Survey

In his discussion on *naskh*, the Shafi'i scholar, Jalal al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505), whose *Al-Itqan fi 'ulum al-Qur'an*

(1980) receives a widely acclaimed recognition among scholars, mentions that a great many scholar have written monographs on *naskh*. Names like Abu 'Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Sallam (d. 224/839), Abu Dawud Sulayman ibn al-Ash'ath al-Sijistani (d. 275/888), Abu Bakr Muhammad b. al-Qasim al-Anbari (d. 328/939), Abu Ja'far Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Nahhas (d. 338/949), Abu Muhammad Makki b. Abi Talib al-Qaysi (d. 437/1045) and Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Arabi (d. 543/1148), are some of the foremost early authorities on *naskh* (Suyuti, v.2, 20-7).

Slightly more than a century earlier, his predecessor, Badr al-Din Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah al-Zarkashi (d. 793/1391), to whom al-Suyuti was indebted for his *Itqan*, also cites Qatadah ibn Di'amah al-Sadusi (d. 117/735), 'Abd Allah ibn Sallamah b. Nasr al-Baghdadi, otherwise known as Hibat Allah ibn Sallamah (d. 410/1019), and Abu al-Faraj 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Ali ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597/1201) in his *Burhan* (v.2, 28), in addition to the above authorities mentioned by al-Suyuti. A well-known scholar and a towering figure of late first century of Islam, Muhammad ibn Muslim ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (d. 124/742), though neither featured in the *Burhan* nor the *Itqan*, was a contemporary of Qatadah ibn Di'amah, except that the former was a renowned scholar of Madinah (Ibn Sa'd, v. 2, 388), while the latter was particularly well known in Basrah and Baghdad (al-Baghdadi, 1996: v. 9, 11).

Qatadah and al-Zuhri are both very important personalities in our study of *naskh* and the Qur'an.

Both were distinguished *traditionists* (*muhaddithin*) and *traditionalists* (*ahl al-hadith wa al-sunnah* as opposed to *ahl al-ra'y*) in their own right. Al-Zuhri himself is alleged to be among the first to officially compile the traditions (*ahadith*) of the Prophet (al-Shaybani, *Muwatta'*, 13 & 398). He was also the teacher of Malik ibn Anas (d. 179/795) of the Maliki legal school, whose seminal work, the *Muwatta'*, is believed to be the first systematically-arranged

composition of the prophetic traditions predating the *Sahih* of al-Bukhari. Qatada's *Kitab al-Nasikh wa al-Mansukh fi Kitab Allah Ta'ala* and al-Zuhri's *Kitab al-Nasikh wa al-Mansukh* represent the earliest extant materials ever written on the *tafsir* genre, *naskh al-Qur'an*. Our study of *naskh* has therefore to include and begin with both of these texts.

A brief study of the two works of Qatadah and al-Zuhri shows that they are very brief, but precise, simplified and presumptive. They are presumptive in the way they appear to have taken for granted an existing tradition of knowledge and awareness by which readers are expected to be familiar with *naskh*. In both cases, the authors did not deal with the theoretical issues of *naskh*. Appearing as manuals, both works begin immediately to point to the abrogated in the Qur'an, spelling out those verses each time, hence, al-Zuhri's opening remarks, "This is a book on the abrogated in the Qur'an," (18). This is indicative that the need to elucidate the meaning of *naskh* was uncalled for given the fact that people around them were already accustomed to its notion.

Qatadah and al-Zuhri were not alone. Following their didactic style was the great exegete and scholar of Basrah, Muqatil ibn Sulayman al-Balkhi al-Khurasani (d. 150/767). The study of Muqatil is important to us as his work, the *Tafsir* of Muqatil ibn Sulayman (1979-89), constitutes the earliest extant work of Qur'anic exegesis, significantly predating the much celebrated *Tafsir* of Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310/922). Presumably, Muqatil had also written on *naskh* (al-Nadim, *al-Fihrist*, 1970: 40), but his work is no longer available to us. We can only glean at his approach and position on *naskh* by looking at his *Tafsir*, as well as his *Kitab Tafsir al-Khamsah Mi'ah Ayah min al-Qur'an al-Karim* (1980). In both works, the assumption too is that *naskh* is a matter fully understood during his time such that the need to explain and elaborate on the theory did not occur. In dealing, for example, with the *change of Qiblah*, Muqatil simply explains the

circumstances surrounding the related verses in the Qur'an that purport to carry the instruction for the early Muslims to change the direction to which they face during their prayers. Only in his *Tafsir al-Khamsah* did he make explicit that Q. 2: 144 abrogates (*nasakhat*) 2: 115.

Contemporaneous with Muqatil was Malik himself. Malik may have explained the theory of *naskh* somewhere else, but if we were to rely solely on his *Muwatta'*, then, nothing much theoretical on *naskh* is said in it either. That Malik was certainly aware of *naskh* is obvious given his references to it, particularly in his legal discussion concerning the number of times a child is *suckled* (breastfed) before making him (or her) a *muhrim* (v. 2, 608), and the other concerning inheritance and bequest (v. 2, 763-5).

The tradition of taking *naskh* for granted seems to have continued for some time post-Muqatil and Malik. We see this, for instance, in the 2nd/3rd-century composition of Abu 'Ubayd (John Burton, 1987; Muhammad al-Mudayfir, 1990). Though we see a more systematic classification of the *nasikh* and the *mansukh* according to legal themes, Abu 'Ubayd's discussion of *naskh* remains scanty, an indication, once again, of the widespread understanding of *naskh* during his time. What has perhaps changed by Abu 'Ubayd's time since Qatadah and al-Zuhri is a more elaborate explanation on each given instance of abrogation and a visible increase in the number of instances. Again here however, we find it very intriguing that Abu 'Ubayd could have been very casual in his approach toward *naskh* theorizing, given the fact that he was a student of Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi'i (d. 204/819), whose instruction on *naskh* is considered as very paradigmatic. It was not until al-Nahhas that we see the beginning of a more serious discussion on the theory of *naskh* as evidenced in his work. It should be assumed that this seriousness had already started to be widespread during the time span separating Abu 'Ubayd and al-Nahhas. Apart from internal evidence, the title of al-Nahhas'

work is indicative of this, and that we only come to have access to this information due to the fact that many other works on *naskh* before al-Nahhas' time did not survive for our scrutiny. It also seems to be the case if we were to consider al-Nahhas' reliance on early sources for his *naskh* composition. Works like those of Malik b. Anas, al-Shafi'i, Abu 'Ubayd, 'Abd al-Razzaq ibn Hammam al-San'ani (d. 211/826), Abu Muhammad 'Abd Allah b. Muslim b. Qutaybah (d. 276/889), Abu Dawud al-Sijistani, Al-Tabari, Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Hazm (d. c. 320/932) and Abu Bakr al-Anbari, were among those mentioned in al-Nahhas. By the time of Hibat Allah, the discourse on *naskh* had gotten even more sophisticated. This could be seen in his *al-Nasikh wa al-Mansukh fi al-Qur'an* (1997). Also, following the distinct format that we see in al-Nahhas, we see too in Hibat Allah instances of *naskh* being grouped according to the chapters in the Qur'an and discussed in the order of the arrangement of the chapters. Makki ibn Abi Talib continued with Hibat Allah's tradition, and by the time Ibn al-Jawzi appeared on the scene, the whole discussion on *naskh* had become very elaborate, sophisticated and more complex, a convention that continues till the time of al-Suyuti and beyond.

The writings of al-Shafi'i and the Hanafi scholar-jurist-cum-*usuli*, Abu Bakr Ahmad b. 'Ali al-Razi al-Jassas (d. 370/980), are also very instructive and instrumental to our understanding of *naskh*. For that we turn to al-Shafi'i's *Risalah* (1979) and al-Jassas' *Fusul* (1994). Apart from being among the formative materials for early Islamic legal thought, these compositions are also very important for two other reasons: that their authors both represent two different legal schools of thought, and that their works and thinking provided the foundation for subsequent writings and the subsequent development of the Muslim legal philosophy (*usul al-fiqh*).

As we know, *usul al-fiqh* is a systematic and well-structured discipline that prescribes a legal methodology by which Muslims derive at legal conclusions and rulings from the authoritative

material sources of Islam. For those familiar with works of *usul*, it is a fact that the treatment of *naskh* forms a major part of them. It is therefore the case that, just as we need to look into the materials independently written on *naskh* for its definition and principles, we need as well to look into the materials of *usul al-fiqh* for our understanding and appreciation of the term. Al-Jassas' *Fusul* exclusively puts his *usul* material right after al-Nahhas thereby giving us a unique peek at how the *naskh* theorists and the *usulis* interlock with each other.

Defining and Understanding Naskh

The theory of *naskh* has been dealt with by many. The editorial remarks of Qatadah's *Kitab al-Nasikh wa al-Mansukh* (p.10–8) for instance, listed over seventy names of those who have written solely on *naskh* (both classical and contemporary), while Abu 'Ubayd's *al-Nasikh wa al-Mansukh* (p.59–76) on the other hand, listed some thirty-nine names. Despite the numerous writings, or perhaps because of them, *naskh* remains a problematic theory, if not a difficult and divisive one (Mustafa Zaud, 1963: v.1, 4). In order to appreciate this problem, we have to start by looking into the linguistic and technical definitions of the term.

Naskh, an Arabic noun with roots in the transitive verbs, *n-s-kh* and *y-n-s-kh* (pronounced as *na-sa-kha* and *yan-sa-khu* respectively), is a rather complex term with multiple meanings. Commonly translated into English as 'repeal', 'effacement', annulment, or simply 'abrogation', *naskh* is linguistically associated with a handful of other terms such that in practice, *naskh* can only be meaningfully elucidated in conjunction with those terms. This is partly the reason why scholars in the past have difficulty reconciling with one another given the fact that they tended to refer to *naskh* in accordance with their individual inclination and use of those terms (al-Jassas, v.2, 195).

Two terms are often used by early *naskh* theorists to define the basic meaning and connotation of

naskh: the first, *naql*, and the second, *izalah*. *Naql* gives us two literal senses: first is ‘transfer’ or ‘translocation’, as to physically move something or a person from one place to another, and the second, ‘copying’ or ‘transcription’, as when someone copies the content of a book or a document in order to produce a new, duplicate copy of it. Copying may involve the transfer of the entire content of a material or just parts of it. In copying or transcribing too, the original may be retained, giving us two copies of the same material, the original and the duplicate, or, the new duplicate copy totally replaces the original. Here the original is completely erased by virtue of it being copied and having its content transferred. *Izalah*, on the other hand, is usually taken to mean ‘suppression’ or ‘obliteration’, implying that something is made to disappear. In *izalah*, the intent is to render the book or document inaccessible either through suppressing or hiding it (maintaining its presence, but removing it from sight), or by completely destroying it and removing it from existence. We find in *izalah* the idea that whatever is being suppressed may or may not be replaced with something else (al-Nahhas, v.1, 399 & 424). There are, however, two terms that are often directly related to *izalah*: *mahw* (‘erasure’) and *rafʿ* (‘withdrawal’; meaning to ‘lift’ or ‘elevate’ something). Both of these terms are usually used as alternatives to *izalah* (al-Shafiʿi, *al-Risalah*, 108; *Lisan al-ʿArab*, v.8, 129 & v.15, 271).

Other than *naql* and *izalah*, a number of other terms are also associated with *naskh*. We find terms like *ibtal* (annulment), *tabdil* (replacement), and *tahwil* (change). We also find terms like *iktitab* and *istinsakh*, both meaning a ‘record’ or ‘writing’, as alternatives to *naql* (*Lisan al-ʿArab*, v.3, 61; v.11, 311 ff. & 674 ff.). We find an example of its use in the *hadith*, in the case of ‘Uthman instructing Zayd to ‘copy-transfer’ the content of revelations from the *suhufs* to the *mushaf*, and then to reproduce the *mushaf* into a number of copies (*sing*, *nuskhah*; plural, *nusakh*) to be distributed to strategic faraway places (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, h.4604; *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, h.3029).

Taking the sum total, we may conclude that *naskh* is a term that expresses the broad idea of the suppression (*izalah*) of a text or something as a result of its erasure (*mahw*) or simply a withdrawal (*rafʿ*), or the idea of a transfer through the process of transcription (*naql*). The idea gives us a sense of the annulment or cessation (*ibtal*) of the original intent or the removal (*rafʿ*) of the material, and it involves the obliteration (*izalah*) or translocation (*naql*) of either a part of or the entire material. In the process, the original is either retained or completely removed. *Naskh* may or may not involve a substitution or replacement (*tabdil*), but what is certainly visible is that *naskh* manifests a change (*tahwil*) (al-Amidi, *al-Ihkam*, v.3, 102; *al-Burhan*, v.2, 29; *al-Itqan*, v.2, 20). Assuming that at the center of *naskh* is change, then, we could simply regard the slightest impression of a change as an indication of *naskh*. This assumption is important and necessary as we attempt to understand how *naskh* was understood since early Islam especially given the fact that *naskh* had been loosely applied in the past.

As can be seen, *naskh* is quite a straightforward term, but perceptibly made complicated by the range of terms associated with it. This in turn leads and contributes to the apparent dispute and differences in opinion that we find among the scholars on the definition of *naskh*. Be that as it may, our linguistic definition of *naskh* has to be distinguished and separated from the conception of *naskh* as a technical legal term. When it concerns the technical conception of *naskh*, there is no disagreement among *naskh* scholars. The present study also reveals that the real disagreement among the Muslim scholars of antiquity in determining whether any of the existing revelations of the Qur’an were abrogated or not happens not at the conceptual level of definition, but rather, at the practical level of application. It goes to show then, that, connotative linguistic variants of *naskh* are, at the end of the day, inconsequential in determining the abrogation of any particular verse of the Qur’an.

Abu 'Ubayd discusses *naskh* in a very simple and straightforward manner. He explains that *naskh*, when applied to the Qur'an, appears in three different situations. The first involves the *suppression* and the *replacement* of a Qur'anic *ayah* by another, which implies the *retention* (*yuthabbit*) of the *ayah* and the *substitution* (*tabdil*) of its *ruling* (*hukm*). Here, *naskh* involves the *nasikh* (that which is abrogating) and *mansukh* (that which is abrogated) verses that are confirmed written and read in the Qur'an, except that with the *mansukh*, no action is required from it, while the *nasikh* is what is regarded as the Qur'anic imperative.

The second application of *naskh* entails the *withdrawal* (*raf'*) of a verse that had been suppressed (*mansukh*) after it was revealed. In support of this interpretation, Abu 'Ubayd cites an *athar* tradition on the authority of Ibn Shihab, who quoted a discussion that took place during a session conducted by Sa'id ibn al-Musayyab (d. 93/711). An incident was mentioned where a number of *Sahabah* reported to the Prophet that they each had separately tried to recite a *surah* but each time they could not. To that the Prophet explained that those chapters of the Qur'an had been withdrawn (*al-Nasikh*, 14-15).

The third application of *naskh* utilizes the use of *naql*. Here, Abu 'Ubayd appropriates Q. 45: 29 to justify the use and application of *naql* under the terms that we have already discussed above. He is quick to qualify immediately though that the use of *naql* as an interpretation of *naskh* is not relevant to our discussion of *naskh* in the Qur'an. Obviously Abu 'Ubayd was alluding to *naskh* in the technical sense, and this brings us to the legal definition of *naskh*.

As part of our discussion and legal conversation on *naskh*, *naql* is excluded in the discourse. It does not feature in our study for reasons expressed above, as well as for the plain fact that *transfer* is not something that we usually associate with the law. In any event, what has indeed become clear to us at this point is that, when it comes to appreciating *naskh* as a general term in Arabic, *naql* and *izalah* are both utilized.

On the other hand, when understood strictly as a legal term and application, *izalah* and *raf'* are typically the two most common terms associated with it, a perspective shared by almost all of our sources. In other words, *naskh* in the technical sense is always strictly understood to mean *izalah* or *raf'*.

Hibat Allah provides us with the most basic technical definition of *naskh*. To him, *naskh* is the legal "withdrawal of the ruling of that, which has been suppressed" (*raf' hukm al-mansukh*), implying, obviously, the withdrawal of the ruling of the Qur'anic revelation that had been suppressed. Others have strictly defined *naskh* as the *suppression* (*izalah*) or the *withdrawal* (*raf'*) of a *legal ruling* (*hukm*; henceforth referred to as simply 'ruling' or the 'law') causing a cessation in its application. Simply put, *naskh* causes an existing law to be *suspended* (*ibtal*). In practice, a new ruling comes to replace the old. The idea of a ruling being suppressed only to be replaced by a new ruling has led some scholars to regard the cessation of the law as a matter of a time-honored condition such that when the time lapses, the law ceases to be. As early as al-Shafi'i, *naskh* is regarded as the abandonment of what was previously made obligatory as a result of the expiration of its time-honored obligation. This idea is also later pursued by scholars after him like al-Jassas, Ibn Hazm and al-Zarkashi.

Al-Jassas prefers instead to see *naskh* as the cessation, due to *suppression*, of the law as a result of its time-honored obligation, the same way al-Shafi'i does, rather than as *withdrawal* (*raf'*) (*al-Fusul*, v.1, 171). Al-Jassas' contention lies in the assumption that the law works within its own limiting time-frame, such that when a particular legal time-frame lapses, the law ceases to apply. This, he argues, helps to explain *naskh*, which, in essence, is simply a legal *cessation* or *substitution* in the sense that when the time for the first ruling comes to an end, the law ends. A new ruling comes, replaces the first, and initiates a new legal time-frame. With the second ruling, a new law begins.

It is pretty obvious from the very outset that *naskh* is only interested in, and deals exclusively with, the law. As such, when applied to the Qur'an, the boundaries of *naskh* are defined by the parameters of legislative interests, be they commandments (*amr*) or prohibitions (*nahy*) (al-Nahhas, v.1, 404; al-Jassas, v.2, 202). *Naskh* concerns itself with only revelations pertaining to positive laws.

Typically, when a law is established, it is fixed. It is therefore legally natural and logical to assume that the law does not change and remains in effect forever for as long as no legal amendment is enacted. The amendment of existing laws require, and is done through, the introduction of new laws. In common laws, this is achieved through the introduction of amendment bills, usually written.

In Islamic law, the foundation of the law is first and foremost, the Qur'an. The law is therefore established through divine revelations, now codified within the Qur'an. What it means is, if there were to take place an abrogation or the repeal of the law, it has to be established through the appearance(s) of new revelations. Just as we see amendments superseding original enactments in common law, so too with the Qur'an that when new revelations came down to replace the previous ones, new rulings replace and override the old ones.

The logical idea of a new revelation substituting an earlier one has led to a new and expanded definition of *naskh*, now conceived as “the **abrogation or suppression of a ruling that had previously been established and acted on (the mansukh) by a new established ruling that requires a new enactment (the nasikh).**” Applying this definition to the Qur'an we get the scenario of a revelation that had previously been revealed being replaced by a new revelation, the purpose being to replace the old ruling that is embedded in the 'old' revelation with the new ruling contained in, and intended by, the new revelation. *Naskh* therefore reflects the process of legal change

(*tahwil*). In this reconstructed definition of *naskh*, *suppression* or *withdrawal (izalah/raf')* and *replacement (tabdil/ibdal)* coexist in *naskh*. The abrogation and replacement of revelations are what constitutes as *supersession*. *Naskh* in the technical, legal sense therefore requires *supersession*. That *supersession* defines the original meaning of *naskh al-Qur'an* is very significant.

The Study of Naskh: Importance and Significance

Ibn 'Abbas once indicated his preference for Ibn Mas'ud's reading of the Qur'an. He explained that the Prophet used to have the Qur'an revised to him once every year, except for the year when he died (32/651), the Qur'an was revised twice, and during each revision, Ibn Mas'ud was present. In addition, he was also very informed of what had been suppressed and what had been replaced of the Qur'an, a clear reference to *naskh al-Qur'an* (*Musnad Ahmad*, h.3247; *Tabaqat ibn Sa'd*, v.2, 342).

'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr (d. 73/692) once asked 'Uthman ibn 'Affan (d. 35/655) why he included Q. 2: 240 in the Qur'an despite knowing that it had been abrogated. 'Uthman explained that he would not change anything of the Qur'an from its position (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, h. 4166).

Ibn al-Jawzi writes that 'Umar ibn al-Khattab once said that Ubayy was the most knowledgeable among them in matters of the *mansukh* in the Qur'an (Ibn al-Jawzi, *Nawasikh al-Qur'an*, 19).

A few things could be observed from the above narratives. In the *hadith* report from Ibn 'Abbas, Ibn Mas'ud seemed to be highly regard for his regular attendance during each revision of the Qur'an. He also enjoyed the recognition for his know-how on what had been abrogated in the Qur'an. In the case of the narrative from 'Umar, Ubayy was considered the reference person for *naskh*. As for the alleged exchange between 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr and 'Uthman,

it is significant to us that the conversation, which presumably took place at about the time, or immediately after, the Qur'an was codified, indicates the presence and inclusion of abrogated verses in the existing *mushaf*. On one level, it confirms the assumption of *naskh* theorists that there are revelations in the Qur'an that are still being read, except that their rulings have been suppressed and withdrawn (*naskh-ed*). Yet on another level, it challenges the supposition that abrogated revelations might have been excluded in the composition of the Qur'an as possibly suggested by Muqatil ibn Sulayman in his interpretation of Q. 13: 39.

At this stage juncture, it remains difficult to say with certainty if there still are *mansukh* in the Qur'an or only the *nasikh*. Evidence needed to confirm this has so far been inconclusive – at times, appearing contradicting. If we simply rely on the narrative from 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr, then, the probability of finding in the Qur'an revelations that are considered as *mansukh* is very high. On the other hand, yet another report from 'Umar mentions that they used to ignore some of Ubayy's readings despite him being regarded as their best reciter (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, h. 4121). Ibn Hajar explains that those readings were revelations that had allegedly been abrogated (*Fath al-Bari*). If Ibn Hajar's explanation is permitted, and if we were now to believe 'Umar's tradition, then, 'Umar's comment on Ubayy suggests the exclusion of all revelations that had been abrogated, leaving us with the impression that the present Qur'an is free from the *mansukh*.

I have included the discussion on the above three narratives to demonstrate how *naskh* has impacted the early Muslims and how it had or may influence us in the way we look at and understand the Qur'an. But above all, in how they may impact us in the way we understand the theory.

On that note, let us assume that there is *naskh* in the Qur'an, and that revelatory verses that have been abrogated remain in it. Let us then introduce the image of an ordinary person who is ignorant of the *nasikh* and the *mansukh*, and

have him open up the pages of the Islamic text. He reads Q. 2: 234 and 2: 240 and notices an apparent contradiction between the two texts, but has no idea that according to the above conversation between 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr and 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, the latter has been abrogated by the former verse. On another occasion, he reads Q. 2: 219 and 4: 43. According to 4: 43, he is not to perform his prayers in the event that he is intoxicated. 2: 219 on the other hand informs him that while *khamr* ('intoxicant') carries a great sin with it, there are still some benefits that he could reap from it. The two verses combined, would only go as far as to give him the impression that for as long as he refrains from praying while intoxicated, or that he bears his own responsibility for the outcome of drinking, drinking remains permissible to him. The two verses do not give the sense of prohibition when read on their own. As a result, he continues to pray and read the Qur'an, but he continues to drink too.

Another individual flips open the Qur'an and reads passages 2: 234 and 2: 240 and comprehends their legal implications. He also reads the *khamr*-passages and understands that Q. 5: 90 abrogates the rulings in Q. 2: 219 and 4: 43. He is aware that 5: 90 signifies a prohibition of drinking in Islam. The permissibility that he gathers from the previous revelations has been revoked (*naskh-ed*) by the legal requirement contained in 5: 90. So to him, it does not matter if he could maintain sobriety before his prayers and take full responsibility for his drinking, or that he would gain some benefits out of drinking. The fact of the matter is that, to him, drinking is prohibited in Islam.

The above illustrations serve to demonstrate the importance of the knowledge of *naskh*. From pure legal considerations, it makes logical sense that to appreciate the law, a Muslim needs to comprehend the legal oriented revelations. Knowing the *nasikh* and the *mansukh* in the Qur'an (to be distinguished here from the actual theory of *naskh*) thus becomes extremely significant. One's authority to interpret the Qur'an lies in part in his understanding of the

nasikh and *mansukh* in the Qur'an, the absence or the lack of knowledge of which renders him incompetent of true understanding of the Scripture. Without the proper know-how of the abrogated, one's knowledge of the divine text is considered as deficient.

The need to realize how important it is for readers of the Qur'an and the Islamic law to understand the doctrine of abrogation cannot be overstated. Unfortunately, the confusion and the complexities that the discourse of *naskh* is often associated with are enough to turn many people away from an honest study of the theory, or, worse still, lead them to discount *naskh* in totality.

A Misunderstanding of the Theory of *Naskh*

From al-Bukhari, we have gotten some idea of *naskh* in relation to the Qur'an from what 'Umar thought of Ubayy. We read from al-Nasa'i that according to Ibn 'Abbas, Q. 33: 49 abrogates 2: 228 (*Sunan*, h. 3442). These two verses incidentally typify the condition for *takhsis*. And from Muslim, we are told that an Abu al-'Ala' ibn al-Shikhkhir (d. 107/725), a *Tabi'i*, reportedly said that the *hadith* of the Prophet abrogates one another the way the Qur'an abrogates itself (Muslim, *Sahih*, h. 520).

The foregoing statements from al-Bukhari, al-Nasa'i and Muslim are informative and they may all be used as evidence of *naskh* in the Qur'an. They are representative of the historical information that helps us establish its reality. In may be deduced that Muhammad's Companions and their successors were unanimous on the actuality of the phenomenon of *naskh*. When they first understood *naskh*, it was not on the basis of its theory. The theory did not exist then. They understood it the way it truly appeared to them as a real, unfolding phenomenon. Over time, evidence from internal analyses of the Qur'an as a legal text, or statements of opinion gathered from authorities of the past, or historical materials that could help contextualize the archaic 'statements of truth', has helped

assist those who came after them understand this urgent concept in the Islamic legal and exegetical tradition.

To readers of the Qur'an and the law, whether as a theoretical foundation or as actual incidents in the Qur'an, evidence pointing to *naskh* seems overwhelming. But at the same time, we find dissenting voices that persistently deny the doctrine. The question is, if *naskh* is real, why the denial; and if it is unreal, why the belief? How could a long tradition established by a community bounded by faith and integrity, and supported by continuity and sustainability be so wrong? Could *naskh* really be just a figment of the imagination of the people of our distant past? Could they have not understood or simply misunderstood something that is naturally ingrained in the language of their own culture? Could the people of the past have come up with the theory only because they did not understand their own religion and sacred text despite being actual participants of their own history? *Naskh* theorizing has come a long way, so why the insisting skepticism?

The tradition of denying and rejecting *naskh* in the Qur'an could be 'universally' traced back to the fourth-century *Hijri* scholar, Abu Muslim al-Isfahani. He is said to have penned his thoughts and position on *naskh* in his *Jami' al-Ta'wil* (al-Amidi, *al-Ihkam*, v.3, 115), a work that never survived for our scrutiny. He has since become a celebrated icon for those who are skeptical about *naskh al-Qur'an*. Nothing concrete however is known of al-Isfahani's actual arguments other than what may be gathered from secondary sources, which almost tantamount to hearsays. His actual position and thoughts therefore remain unclear. Sadly, this has led to the injustice and abuse of his name. It is not uncommon to find name-dropping in many contemporary works of *naskh*. A particular example would be the work of Ahmad Hasan (*Islamic Studies*, 4, 2, 1965: 181-200). Ahmad Hasan's inquiry into *naskh* is especially lacking in seriousness and credibility especially when it comes to his use of al-Isfahani as a premise for the rejection of

naskh. Other than his passing remark on al-Isfahani, nothing at all is said on the latter's arguments; a fact that does not surprise us given the obscurity of the latter's position. But that Ahmad Hasan would name-drop does not do justice to *naskh* scholarship. In the Western scholarship on *naskh*, John Burton is as guilty as Hasan. He mentions al-Isfahani in his writings but without any meaningful explanation and elaboration (1977; 1987; 1990).

Alleged Instances of *Naskh*

Our survey of alleged instances of *naskh* should not be limited and restricted to certain given samples. It has also to include all instances readily available and provided by scholars of *naskh*. However, owing to the discursive nature and the restrictions of this paper, only a number of instances will be mentioned.

Makki's initial caution has proven itself to be true. Not only were the early Muslims unable to agree on every alleged instance of *naskh*, they also could not agree on the details of the alleged instances, the number of instances; and the classification of the instances.

Be that as it may, the one thing that the alleged instances have proven, if nothing else, is that, *naskh al-Qur'an* does exist. It is real and actual and rooted in concrete historical and textual grounding. That the *naskh* scholars could not agree on every single detail informing *naskh* should not be a reason to deny and reject *naskh*. Disagreement in judgment and conclusion is not an indication that *naskh* as a theory and a phenomenon is false. Thomas S. Khun once said, "The determination of shared paradigms is not, however, the determination of shared rules," (1996, 43). After all, even Newton, Lavoisier, Maxwell and Einstein may have produced "an apparently permanent solution to ... outstanding problems and still disagree ... about particular abstract characteristics that make those solutions permanent," (Khun, 44).

The history of the Muslims and the history of the text of the Qur'an are also replete with

event and incidents that would provide for a historical grounding for *naskh*. We may consider such reports as the one from 'Abd al-Rahman b. Abza in which Ubayy once asked if the Prophet had forgotten a verse or that it had been abrogated, or the historical change of the Qiblah, or the alleged conversation between 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr and 'Uthman, as some of the true indications of the historical incidence and evidence of *naskh*.

The reality of *naskh* does not lie in the number of *naskh* we can prove; all it takes is one incident. But the truth is, we may actually locate *naskh* in not just one, but in a number of instances. In this context for instance, if unanimity is the measure of the true event of *naskh*, then, the consensus of the scholars on the abrogation of almost four revelations involving Q. 2: 184, 2: 240, 4: 43, and 73: 1-4, supports this contention. Particularly with Q. 2: 184 and 73: 1-4, what we have gathered from historical and internal evidence may prove denying the occurrence of *naskh* a difficult defense. Internal examination of the contents of a number of other related verses also reveals the great possibility that those verses had been legally abrogated. Reports and evidence from the past, where available, will only serve to reinforce and confirm this observation. Examples of those verses are Q. 2: 180 in relation to 4: 11, Q. 4: 43 in relation to 5: 90, and Q. 8: 65 in relation to 8: 66.

To disagree on the instances or the details or the number of *naskh* is understandable, natural and logical. But to deny *naskh* if only because we disagree on one or many instances, or even on the details of the alleged instances of *naskh* would be overly simplistic and *ahistoric*. Thomas Khun would argue that the subjectivity of one's analysis of *naskh* can only suggest that the "failure to achieve a solution discredits only the scientist and not the theory," (Khun, 80).

The *Qur'an* as Revelation and Scripture

To the Muslims, the Qur'an is totally and wholesomely the eternal and uncreated Word of God (Theodor Noldeke, 1998, 36 & 63;

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 1980: 489, 1993: 68). Not simply the word of God, it is the verbatim word of God. It is said that God revealed and communicated the Qur'an directly to Muhammad through the Archangel Gabriel (*Jibril*), sometimes referred to as the *Holy Spirit* (*ruh al-Qudus*) (Q.S. 16: 102) or the *True Spirit* (*al-ruh al-amin*) (Q.S. 26: 193), who acted as the agent or go-between. It is certainly for the Muslims not the word or the composition of Muhammad. Muhammad was merely the mouthpiece of God, the recipient of divine communication (Q.S. 53: 3-4). In this sense therefore, the Qur'an is understood as purely a 'divine revelation'. The Qur'an uses the term '*wahy*' to describe itself as being revealed. Being revealed from the divine, one could also describe the Qur'an as "heavenly."

The Qur'an began as an oral tradition; only later was it written down. Upon being written down, it became a text codified. Once scattered in parchments and scrolls, collectively known as '*suhuf*' (sing., '*sahifah*'), it was later compiled into a single codex called '*mushaf*' (pl., '*masahif*') (see for instance *Fath al-Bari*). The codification of the Qur'an and its use in Muslim piety automatically transforms it into a *scripture*. The Qur'an portrays its self-image as a scripture with the term '*kitab*'. Notwithstanding its scripturality, the integrity and divine authorship of the Qur'an remains.

As *wahy*, the Qur'an, is divine and heavenly. As a *mushaf* however, the Qur'an takes on an earthly form. It goes to show that the Qur'an, as we now understand it to be, is simultaneously a 'heavenly scripture' and an 'earthly book'. As a heavenly scripture the Qur'an was revealed. This revelation entails a process, and as a process, it bore a history. The revelatory history of the Qur'an is generally understood and taken as its *sacred history*. But as an 'earthly book', the Qur'an, by definition, takes on a *human history*. One who attempts to understand the Qur'an has therefore to locate his understanding in the twin histories of the Qur'an: understanding and appreciating the Qur'an as *wahy* and a *mushaf*;

and understanding and appreciating the Qur'an as a *kitab*.

Our understanding of the nature and meaning of the Qur'an is important as it impacts on the way we understand the meaning of *naskh*. Our knowledge of the history (or rather, twin histories) of the Qur'an is essential as it informs us of the chronology of the Qur'anic revelation and the arrangement of the written text, the information of which was later used as the basis for the conception and articulation of the theory of *naskh* in the Qur'an. The study of the chronology of the Qur'an is instrumental to determining the accuracy and exactness of the Qur'anic theory of abrogation. And finally, our understanding of the role of the Qur'an as a sacred scripture within the formative Muslim community is necessary as it ultimately contributes fundamentally to our knowledge of how *naskh* was necessitated and technically understood and applied from the very beginning, from the early conception of the Qur'an to the moment in post-Qur'anic history when *naskh* gradually evolved and was finally conceived as a grand narrative.

***Wahy*: Revelation in Islam**

The Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (saw)'s first encounter with the archangel produced the first five verses of the ninety-sixth chapter of the present Qur'an, the chapter of *The Clot* (*Surat al-'Alaq*) (Alfred Guillaume, *Sirat Ibn Ishaq*, 1995: 105-6; *Tarikh al-Tabari*, v.2, 49). *Surat al-'Alaq* contains nineteen verses. No one knows when exactly the remaining fourteen verses were revealed. But if Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/844)'s *Tabaqat* is of any clue, it is said that the remaining verses of Chapter 96 were revealed subsequent to the first five, making *Surat al-'Alaq* the first complete *surah* of the Qur'an (v.1, 196). Subsequent to this, after a lull of about two-and-a-half to three years, the seventy-fourth chapter of the Qur'an, the *Surat al-Muddaththir*, came down. After that, revelation is said to have continued without any intermission till the end of the Prophet's

career. All along, Jibril stayed with Muhammad throughout his prophetic ministry, serving as the main channel through which revelations were conveyed (Ibn Sa'd, v.1, 191). The role of the archangel in Muhammad's revelatory and prophetic experience cannot be underestimated. His participation in Muhammad's career helps us in our understanding of the Qur'an as a revelation.

Islam has a very unique concept of 'revelation'. Islam perhaps has the distinction of being the only religion that conceives revelation as being simultaneously oral and written from the very first instance. The oral represents the kind of experience that Muhammad was subjected to, where revelation was verbally communicated to him, and the written refers to the origin of that oral communication. In this latter instance, the Qur'an speaks about the existence of the divine source in the form of a "well-guarded tablet" (*lawh mahfuz*) (Q.S. 85: 22), a "concealed book" (*kitab maknun*) (Q.S. 56: 78) that serves as the "mother of the book" (*umm al-kitab*) in the presence of God (Q.S. 13: 39; 43: 4). This heavenly scripture serves as the original text from which the whole composition of the Qur'an that was later revealed to Muhammad was based on (*al-Burhan*, v.2, 30).

In a *hadith* tradition from Ibn 'Abbas, revelation is portrayed as a two-phase-process. The first phase involves revelation originating from *al-lawh al-mahfuz*, the 'well-guarded tablet'. The Qur'an, having originated from this, was then brought down as a complete whole (*jumlah wahidah*) to the 'lowest heaven' (*al-sama' al-dunya*). The second phase entails the coming down of revelation piecemeal in stages (*mufarriqan* or *tafsilan*) from *al-sama' al-dunya* to Muhammad until the whole Qur'an was completely revealed (*Tafsir Muqatil*, v.1, 161; *Jami' al-Bayan*, v.2, 196-198). That said, what is really revelation in Islam?

Apart from 'wahy', the Qur'an is also known as 'munazzal' (Q.S. 6: 114), or more commonly referred to as 'tanzil' (Q.S. 20: 4; 26: 192; 32: 2). One can say that 'wahy' indicates the meaning

of revelation in Islam, while 'munazzal' and 'tanzil' describe its nature. Both the latter come from the Arabic root meaning 'descend' or 'come down'.

The idea of *wahy* being 'brought down' is important in a number of ways. First, it reinforces the theological tradition of the two-phase concept of revelation. Second, 'munazzal' and 'tanzil' point to the transportation and descent of revelation from an original location, thus affirming the idea of the Qur'anic origin in a central document (*umm al-kitab*) that is in the presence of God in a self-serving way. Third, the 'fact' that the Qur'an was transported or brought down through a journey that connected "heaven and earth" lends us the notion that it was fully composed before and after the journey. The question is, what is the nature of revelation that was brought down?

Al-Zarkashi discusses in his *Burhan* that Muslim scholars are unanimous about the Qur'an being 'brought down' (*munazzal*), but they dispute about the nature of its 'descent' (*inzal*). According to him, there are three possible natures of the Qur'an brought down by the Angel: the first, God taught Gabriel everything about the Qur'an – its wording, reading and meaning – and the latter understood and memorized it and brought it down whole and complete to the Prophet. The Qur'an was received fully composed and recited, including its interpretation; the second, Gabriel simply understood and conveyed the meaning of the divine message and left it to Muhammad to render it in his own Arabic tongue; and the third, Gabriel only understood and memorized the meaning of the heavenly message and later brought it down to Muhammad in his (Gabriel's) own words (*al-Burhan*, v.1, 229-230).

Tanzil al-Qur'an

The Qur'an did not come down to Muhammad all at once. The two-phase revelatory process is testimony to this fact. The Qur'an provides further evidence and justification in this regard. Q. S. 17: 106 informs us that the Qur'an had been divided and recited at intervals and revealed in succession. Internal examination of the Qur'an equally points to this unassailable fact. To the extent that this is incontrovertible, the Qur'an further describes the reaction of the Arabs to Muhammad's assertion of his prophetic office when they demanded and regretted that the Qur'an was not revealed all at once (*jumlah wahidah*) (Q.S. 25: 32).

The basic units of revelation in Islam were short passages of the Qur'an. In other words, the Qur'an first started as separate revelations of its *ayat*. It was only later that these *ayat* were arranged and ordered within the *surahs* (W.M. Watt, 1997; John E. Merrill, 1947, 134-148; Andrew Rippin, 1992, 639-647). This only serves to argue that the formation of the chapters of the Qur'an was not instantaneous; it was a gradual process.

One easily finds that many verses of the Qur'an do not always follow arrangements suggesting a logical flow or a coherent pattern of unity. Nonetheless, Q. 25: 32 asserts that the arrangement and ordering of the Qur'anic verses were under divine guidance. The notion that the Qur'an felt the need to have its content ordered presupposes the assumption that it could not have generally come down in chapter forms.

That Qur'anic revelations were so ordered according to divine guidance has long been the foundation of the Muslims' theological understanding of the Qur'an. Many *hadith* reports appear to be supportive of this. For instance, Abu 'Ubayd reports in his *Fada'il al-Qur'an* (1991, 152), Imam Ahmad in his *Musnad* (h. 376 & 468), and al-Tirmidhi in his *Sunan* (h. 3011), from Ibn 'Abbas, quoting 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, that whenever revelation

came down in a form of a *verse* or a *number of verses*, Muhammad would instruct his scribes to record them down within a particular *surah*. Perhaps most instructive of *hadith* traditions that could give us the clearest of clues with regard to the arrangement of *ayat* is the report from 'Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr, who once allegedly wondered why 'Uthman still included Q. 2: 240 in the Qur'an despite having been repealed. To that 'Uthman answered, "O my nephew, I will not change anything from it (*Qur'an*) from its place," (al-Bukhari, h. 4166 & 4172).

When it comes to chapters (*surahs*) of the Qur'an, it is only logical and reasonable to assume that the *surahs* of the Qur'an must also have come together during the lifetime of Muhammad, otherwise Muhammad would not have made references to them. Muhammad's instruction to his followers indicates a pre-knowledge of the term. The idea that this consequently indicates the *Sahabah's* familiarity with the notion of *surah* speaks for itself.

While we may conclude about the stabilization of the *surahs* and the verses of the Qur'an, we still have not resolved the one basic issue significant to this paper, and that is, the order or chronology of the revelations of these *ayat* and *surahs*. Resolving this is fundamentally important to our inquiry into the theory of *naskh*.

Asbab al-Nuzul: The Occasions of Revelation

A fundamental category in the study of the *tanzil* of the Qur'an is the *occasions of its revelation*. For the theory of *naskh* to function, verses of revelation must operate exegetically. What this means is that we need to understand discriminately the circumstances surrounding each *ayah*. Our comprehension of the contexts of revelation will allow us to a large extent to determine the applicability of *naskh* in the Qur'an. The exegetical genre in Qur'anic studies dealing with the historical and cultural circumstances of revelation is *asbab al-nuzul*, often interpreted as the '*occasions of revelation*' (al-Zarkashi, v.1, 22; al-Suyuti, v.1, 28). In order

to fully appreciate the science of *naskh* we need to begin with at least an understanding of the contexts of revelation.

We may be doing a lot of guesswork in our theoretical reconstruction of the history of the Qur'an. But one thing is a fact: that the Qur'an had a history. In this context, two things must be fundamentally borne in mind whenever one talks about the history of the Qur'an. The first is that the Qur'an did not exist in isolation nor did it come about in a vacuum. It grew along with and within the community it was destined for. In other words, the revelation of the Qur'an comes with underlying circumstances specific to the moments of revelation. Simply put, the Qur'an has its own historical context or contexts. Secondly, the Qur'an is known to have explicitly declared its identity as an Arabic Qur'an. Its text as a whole therefore reflects the linguistic and religious environment of the Arabs (Roger Allen, 2000, 34). There are many revelatory statements that postulate the idea that Arabic was deliberately chosen as the language of the Qur'an in order to facilitate the spoken language of the Arabs so that the Qur'an might easily be understood by them (Q.S. 12: 2; 20: 113; 42: 7). The Qur'an was clearly intended, at least in its original intent, to speak to the intelligence and cultural needs and circumstances of the Arabs that it was historically addressing and was part of. This represents the cultural contexts of the Qur'an. (Cultural context is an anthropological category. One would argue that cultural contexts are by themselves historical. But somehow, cultural distinctions when viewed together with historical contexts are often regarded as separate, identifiable categories).

It is predominantly the case that under *asbab al-nuzul*, the investigation into the historical context of the Qur'an has been a practice well attested to in Qur'anic exegesis. It is however unfortunate that the cultural context of the Qur'an has been gravely neglected. It is in this area of cultural-legal interest that the Islamic scripture has not been given the rightful attention that it deserves. Even if we may not always classify everything under the Arabian culture,

the notion that the Qur'an was revealed in the language of that existing culture does inform us that we probably need to think more seriously about the regional cultural situation of the day. This, indeed, has serious legal implications.

For instance, we know that the Qur'an speaks about the cutting off of the hands of thieves (Q.S. 5:38), the flogging of adulterers and fornicators, all of whom are classified as *zani* or *Zaniyah* (Q.S. 24: 2), or the abandoning and beating of wives who are suspected of *nushuz* (Q.S. 4: 34). It would seem inadequate that we seek the meanings and values of these legal injunctions simply through the study and interrogation of their *asbab* (if any that is). Obviously, as mentioned earlier, revelatory *asbab* are first and foremost necessary for our proper understanding. But include though we need and we must, we should also go beyond *asbab* in our legal deliberation. It ought to be of equal necessity, given the historical nature of the text, for us to seek out if any of these legal principles actually speaks to their cultural situation. Such information would be useful to us. It would help us understand the laws better according to our time.

The study of cultural contexts has never been developed, or at least not been fully appreciated, if ever, in Qur'anic studies. Existing Islamic interpretive tradition, in particular its theology of revelation, therefore, is highly inadequate to address our cultural-anthropological needs in understanding the Qur'an. It lacks the mechanism and necessary tools to incorporate and acknowledge the notion of revelation as something that comes down under divine supervision and intent, but at the same time operates within the human conditions and goals.

Since 'Ali ibn Ahmad al-Wahidi, the earliest authority on the subject whose extant work is available to us, *asbab al-nuzul* has always been about why and how a particular revelation came down, and how such reports surrounding the occasions of revelations could be authenticated and certified as true and acceptable to the best of

the existing knowledge and assessment. Sharing his ideas, al-Suyuti explains that revelation came down for two reasons. One is that revelation was the sole prerogative of God – God decided what he decided; he then revealed. The other is that revelation came down as a result of circumstances on the ground that could either be in the form of a situation that needed to be addressed directly and immediately, or in response and in answer to questions raised (al-Suyuti, v.1, 28).

It is under these conditions that the Qur'an is as much a product of divine initiative as it was of human response (Watt, *Islamic Revelation*, 7). To the degree that it was the prerogative of God, it was a product of divine initiative; and to the degree that it was a result of circumstances on the ground, being in response to the human conditions, it was a product of human response.

Typical in the first instance of divine initiative is the first revelation in Islam to Muhammad at Hira', or the institutionalization of, say, the *Fast* of Ramadan (Q.S. 96: 1-5 or 2: 183 respectively). In the former, God decided that it was time to appoint a messenger, so Muhammad was contacted and revelation was communicated. Similarly for the latter, God finally decided that Muslims should fast, so he made fasting in the month of Ramadan mandatory.

Typical of the second instance in which human circumstances on the ground create the backdrop for a divine response is the revelation of the chapter of 'The Cloaked' (*al-Muddaththir*) that came down after Muhammad had scrambled home in anxiety, and had his body all wrapped up as he shivered, or the Chapter of 'The Spoils' (*al-Anfal*) that came down concerning the situations in the aftermath of the *Battle of Badr* (Ibn Ishaq, 321 ff.; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, h. 4278). And typical too of the second instance in which our spatial-temporal thinking requires a timeless response is the case of the group of Jews who tested Muhammad by way of questioning him on the matter of the spirit. According to the Muslim tradition, Muhammad was originally

silent on the issue until God revealed to him the answer in the form of Q. 17: 85 (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, h. 122; *Sahih Muslim*, h. 5002; *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, h. 3066).

So how do we decide if we could trust and rely on the *sabab* or *asbab* of a particular revelation and how do we verify it? To al-Wahidi, *asbab* of revelation are only determined through direct transmission from those who actually witnessed the event of revelation (1968, 4; *al-Itqan*, v.1, 31). To al-Zarkashi, *asbab al-nuzul* are not matters left to independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) or legal consensus (*ijma'*); they are matters based on certainty (*qat'i*) (*al-Burhan*, v.1 23). Both al-Wahidi and al-Zarkashi are actually speaking of the same thing.

Judging by both their criteria, *asbab al-nuzul* relies heavily on the principle of dependency. In other words, *asbab al-nuzul* is totally dependent on the availability of historical reports that speak about them. But here is precisely where the problem with *asbab al-nuzul* must be carefully considered. Historical reports in the above sense are technically *hadith* reports that are either available in works of Islamic historiography, or works of *tafsir*, or (especially) in canons of *Hadith*, which means, the believability and acceptability of a *sabab* go only as far as the *hadith* traditions concerning it are believable and acceptable. What al-Wahidi and al-Zarkashi are saying is that, when it comes to the matter of *asbab al-nuzul*, one has to be very careful and critical about what one believes in relation to the very *asbab* that one sought to establish.

There are of course many *hadiths* on *asbab* that have been verified and certified as reliable. It is from these *hadiths* that the *asbab* of some revelations are unanimously accepted as 'historically true', or, at the very least, suggestive of interpreted history. Typical of this category is the historical narrative concerning the beginning of revelation experienced by Muhammad and the tradition that deals with the change of *Qiblah* in Q. 2: 144.

But very frequently too we come across *hadiths* on *asbab* that are inconsistent and conflicting with one another. The presence of competing and conflicting reports makes the use of such reports problematic in our effort to determine with relative confidence and exactness the history and circumstances of those revelations. Our inability to resolve the issue of conflict among such *hadith* traditions – and this happens more frequently than one might expect – would render any assumption of the *sabab* behind a given revelation rather suspect. Such an uncertainty calls into question the reliability of the *asbab* genre as a whole.

Some *asbab* reports have the potential to be even embarrassing for the Muslims. In this context, the *asbab* traditions for Q. 4: 95 and 2: 187 are typical examples. It is said that when Q. 4: 95 came down, ‘Abd Allah ibn Umm Maktum happened to come by just as the Prophet was dictating it to Zayd ibn Thabit. ‘Abd Allah was a blind man. In reaction to the new revelation, he gently ‘protested,’ saying that if he was able to, he would have certainly participated in the *jihād*. God responded by sending down a revised revelation (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, h. 4226; *Sahih Muslim*, h. 3516; *Musnad Ahmad*, h. 20618). Q. 4: 95 now reads in part:

Not equal are those among the believers who are ‘seated’ (at home) [*except the disabled*] and those who strive in the path of God with their possessions and their selves ...

The original revelation was without the clause, “except the disabled,” which was inserted in the revised version, shown within parentheses above. According to the report, the process of “*re-revelation*” was instantaneous.

As for Q. 2: 187, this particular verse reads in part:

Permitted to you on the night of the Fast that you go in to your wives. They are your garments as you are garments to them ... So eat and drink until the white thread [of dawn] is distinguishable to you from the black thread.

Then continue to complete your fast till the night appears ...

According to tradition, when the people initially wanted to fast, they would have one of them tie a white and a black thread to his legs. They would then continue to eat in the night till they could distinguish between the two threads. But that was before the clause ‘*of dawn*’ (*min al-fajr*) was inserted into the existing *ayah*. After the clause was revealed, they then understood that the white and black threads were metaphors for day and night (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, h. 4151; *Sahih Muslim*, h. 1825).

Again, in the above tradition on the *fast*, we see an act of “*re-revelation*”, except that this time, the process was not instantaneous. The *hadith* suggests that the Muslims had time to ‘act out’ the instruction long enough before the clause ‘*of dawn*’ was revealed and inserted into the existing revelation. In both instances of “*re-revelation*”, ‘revision’ and ‘insertion’ of revelation took place; that is for sure. But what we do not know is how the process took place. Was Muhammad notified only of the new clauses, which he then later inserted within existing verses, or did Muhammad actually receive new revelations of similar verses, but completely revised? One could speculate that Muhammad was told only of the revisions that he later inserted into the existing verses, otherwise we would have evidence of double records of the same verses or at least indications that Muhammad ever instructed his scribes to strike out revelations that were no longer applicable.

The process of “*re-revelation*” is not as important and significant as the “*re-revelation*” itself. It remains a difficulty for us to anticipate the theological implications that come with the notion of suggestible “*re-revelation*”. Between the two instances, the “*re-revelation*” of Q. 4: 95 appears to be more troubling given its instantaneous nature.

Our discussion on *asbab al-nuzul* so far seems to highlight problems that we have found and will continue to find in the tradition of this exegetical genre. But this does not mean that *asbab al-nuzul* as an exegetical tool has no use to us. On the contrary, it does have a considerable usefulness. To the extent that the *asbab* of revelations could be ascertained, *asbab al-nuzul* serves to enable us to understand the meaning or meanings behind scriptural statements. It also allows us to access the ‘wisdom’ behind Qur’anic legal enactments and, to the degree that the application of laws is required, it helps to facilitate the distinction between what is legally specific and peculiar due to the specific nature of its circumstances, and what is generally applicable due to the general nature of the wording of revelation despite the specific and peculiar nature of its circumstances (*al-Burhan*, v.1, 22ff.; *al-Itqan*, v.1, 28ff.). In the end, the general assumption is that *asbab al-nuzul* provides us with the means to understand the meanings and implications of revelation.

Given the appearances of “re-revelation” above, it is only reasonable that we now venture into this thought-provoking category.

“Re-Revelation” and the Possibility of the Suppression of Revelation

There are a number of critical questions we need to ask in dealing with the kind of theology of revelation as we find in Islam. As noted, revelation came down to the people of the Arabian Peninsula not in isolation but in tandem with the interests and development of the community. A community of people is never static; it changes all the time. A changing society always implies a changing environment, and a changing environment can only mean changing circumstances. So, given the nature of community whose needs and circumstances are constantly changing, our first questions would be, did revelation in Islam change as a result of altering dynamics in the structures of its emerging society, or was it static and unchanging? If revelation did change

accordingly, to what extent can we expect to find those changes in the existing Qur’an and how do we prove that those changes truly constitute real changes?

No one can deny that the cases of Q. 2: 187 and 4: 95 as we have dealt with above clearly suggest that revelation in Islam did change to meet the changing needs and circumstances on the ground. Indeed, if the traditions of the *asbab* of these verses were to be accepted as reliable, it goes beyond doubt that changes in revelation did in fact occur in the history of Qur’anic *tanzil*. This would also mean that “re-revelations” under those circumstances have also been clearly documented. These however, are by no means the only cases of ‘re-revelation’. There are many other examples of instances of revelatory revisions. A brief mention of some would be in order.

The Muslim tradition has it that the first situation that changed after the *Hijrah* was the change in *Qiblah*. The Muslims were used to facing Jerusalem in their prayers while they were in Makkah, and they continued to do so in Madinah. Then Q. 2: 144 was revealed instructing Muhammad and his followers to face Makkah in their prayers (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, h. 384; *Sahih Muslim*, h. 818; *Sunan al-Nasa’i*, h. 484). Q. 2: 144 unmistakably puts the argument of ‘revelatory alignment’ with situations on the ground in perspective. It in fact represents one of the surest examples of ‘revelatory re-alignment’. Another clear example of ‘re-revelation’ involves the revelations of Q. 8: 65 and 66. According to Ibn Ishaq, the Muslims registered their deep reservation and reluctance when verse 65 was first revealed. This led to the follow-up revision in the form of verse 66 (Ibn Ishaq, 326; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, h. 4285; Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bari*). The prohibition of intoxicants represents yet another example of alignment of revelation. Three verses come to mind in this regard: Q. S. 2: 219, 4: 43 and 5: 90. Legal scholars have since argued that these *ayat* indicate the stages involved in the prohibition of alcoholic consumption although some have opposed this orthodoxy. Q. 5: 90 is

most explicit in forbidding intoxicants.

At this juncture, we can almost certainly convince ourselves and conclude that the question of *re-revelation*, or *revelatory revision* or *realignment* of *wahy* is no longer about something to be determined, but rather, about something to be appreciated. What that means is, instances of *re-revelation*, *revision* or *realignment* are clearly enough demonstrated in the Qur'an that our study of these terms is no longer so much about trying to prove if they are acceptable notions as it is about appreciating the degree and the extent to which they are being expressed. In plain language, in the historical process of Qur'anic *tanzil*, changes in revelation unmistakably took place. No one should therefore make any attempt to deny this fact. The question remains however, on whose authority did changes in revelation take place?

For Muslims, the notion of change in revelation is made possible only with the authority of God. Muhammad had nothing to do with it. This is where our recollection of Muhammad's prophetic role in the reception and conveyance of revelation becomes very useful, a role, that is extremely passive and submissive. The Qur'an confirms Muhammad's submissiveness and passivity in many places. We find verses like Q. 6: 50, 7: 203, 10: 15, 10: 37, 10: 109, 13: 38 and 33: 2, where Muhammad vehemently denies he ever invented the Qur'an, and asserts that it was not up to him to change anything from the Qur'an as he was merely following what was revealed to him from God.

With Muhammad's passive and submissive role in the reception of revelation, God's authority and prerogative are clearly established. Apparently, this is precisely what the Qur'an attempts to convey in verses like Q. 16: 101 and 13: 39. Q. 16: 101 talks about God 'replacing' one revelation with another, while Q. 13: 39 establishes his authority to 'efface' and maintain what he wishes of his revelation. The authority to efface and replace is repeated in Q. 2: 106 and 87: 6-7, except that in these two latter

references, an additional mode of authority is introduced, and that is the power of "causing to forget". In Q. 2: 106, the Qur'an declares that whatever God suppresses or caused to be forgotten, he replaces it with another revelation that is better or with one that is comparable; whereas in Q. 87: 6 and 7, God guarantees that whatever Muhammad receives, he does not forget, but should he ever do so, it would only be by divine design and will.

It is not clear what or how exactly it is meant by God causing Muhammad to forget, after all, why would he in the first place? The Qur'an does not provide us with answers to this anywhere in the text. The only clue that we get comes from the *hadith* sources. In one tradition from 'A'ishah, the Prophet is said to have almost forgotten some recitations had it not been for the person who accidentally reminded him through his reading (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, h. 4649; *Sahih Muslim*, h. 1311; *Sunan Abi Dawud*, h. 1134; *Musnad Ahmad*, h. 23199). But the 'forgetting' that is involved here was only temporary, one that did not involve suppression or replacement. It is important for us at this point to note that not only is the Qur'an mum about the actual meaning and process of "causing to forget," it is also uninformative and inexplicit about those verses that had been effaced, if there were any to begin with. It seems that yet again we have to fall back on our reliance on tradition outside of the Qur'an.

There seems to be no valid theological reason to reject changes in revelation or to assume that changes in revelation are antithetical to divine attributes and qualities. Despite the apparent obviousness of changes in revelation, we still find Muslims voicing their objection to the whole notion and possibility of change. The real nature and basis for their objection remain uncertain, but for the most part, their reservation comes from the perceived threat of *bada'*.

Bada' means the 'appearance' or 'disclosure' of something after being hidden (*al-zuhur ba'd al-khifa'*). When applied to humans, it means

to know something after a previous state of not knowing. It implies a change in knowledge. When applied to God, it implies the mutability of divine knowledge and divine will. So for those Muslims who find the idea of change in revelation as amounting to *bada'*, changes in revelation involves changes in divine knowledge and will, something that is unthinkable of God. The idea that divine attributes are mutable is theologically unacceptable. In relation to knowledge, it means that God was previously ignorant, and with a new knowledge of things and situations, there becomes known to him what was previously unknown. This would run counter to his attribute of *omniscience*.

It is rather interesting that early scholars of Islam did not show a great interest in *bada'*. Its discussion is nowhere to be found in many early Muslim sources. Among the earliest works of Qur'an exegesis are those of Mujahid ibn Jabr, Muqatil ibn Sulayman, Sufyan al-Thawri, 'Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani, Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, and Abu Ja'far al-Nahhas, whereas among the earliest and most popular works on *asbab al-nuzul* and Qur'anic studies are those of 'Ali b. Ahmad al-Wahidi, Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah al-Zarkashi and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti. And yet none of them cared to discuss *bada'*. One would expect that if *bada'* is so important in its contradistinction with *naskh*, then, it should have been one of those topics readily touched on.

Bada', to me, is essentially a theological construct, a product of our lack of imagination, or perhaps, too much of it. We think of God based on our own limitations and we impose on God the kind of limitations that we see in ourselves. It is like an atheist wondering if God, being as all powerful as he is made out to be, is able to lift up a boulder larger than he could carry, an argument that is self-contradicting, tautological and meaningless, or like the *Mu'tazilis* arguing that God is limited in his action by his own qualities of mercy and justice, a philosophical justification that has no significant practical value.

That to God is attributed the quality of *omniscience* is a theological foundation in Islam that is well attested to. But to equate a change in divine plan (as in a change in revelation) as equivalent to *bada'* (and thus the change is undesirable because *bada'* is 'bad') represents a leap in faith; between the two, there is no correlation.

The Qur'an as Revelation and Scripture: Some Critical Observations

This paper is not an attempt to settle at a definitive reconstruction of the nature and history of the Qur'an. Any historical reconstruction is approximate at best or speculative and revisionist at worst. The effort at a critical and objective reconstruction of the history of the text remains to be carried out. But what I hope to have achieved is to identify the structural features that have thus far underlined Qur'anic studies in the Muslim world, features that have guided the way Muslims have historically and traditionally understood the Qur'an and the way such an understanding has defined their legal orientation.

This paper, if anything, serves only as an introductory work, a proposal for an expanded study of the Muslim scripture. If the Qur'an is truly a divine piece of work as the Muslim theology stipulates and as the Muslims have so strongly defended, then, it must be the case that no amount of criticism can change that fact. To the extent that this is true, the Qur'an will forever remain relevant. A critical study of the text will not hurt the Muslims; it will only help them. As the Qur'an is undeniably the fountainhead of Islam, not only will the critical study of the text result in a clearer understanding of the development of the scripture in Muslim terms, thereby giving the Muslims a better understanding of their tradition and history, it will also greatly contribute to the Muslim scholarship in almost all fields of interest to Islam.

The brief study of the Qur'an in its function as a

kitab ('scripture) leads us to the realization that it is here that we find the Qur'an articulating the identity and culture of the Muslims. The Qur'an, as many have observed, is not solely a book of law (in the positive sense). It is therefore not meant to serve merely as a book of legal injunctions. To maintain its dynamic character, Muslims have to look at their scripture more as a source of inspiration and spiritual goodwill than as a reference for legal principles and guide. In this respect, Muslims need to go beyond and transcend the legalities of the text. No particular function that the Qur'an has so far been construed to be its source can be used to fix the definition of the Islamic Codex. To fix the nature and purpose of the Qur'an according to a particular function is to limit its scope and function, the very limitation of which it was never meant to be subjected to. The Qur'an is bigger than and beyond our limitations. The Qur'an therefore, in my opinion, should serve as a bridge to our understanding of the mythology of our existence. Muslims should not be too bogged down with the legal details of the Qur'an as much as to allow it to inform them of their tradition and history, and by that, their cultural identity.

Whatever we have discussed, with all the questions that we have raised, does not alter the nature and status of the Qur'an nor will it change the way Muslims view and regard it. After all it is the *sacred* scripture of a sacred community. That is the nature of any religious text. Not only that, we are also dealing here with a historical text that is centuries old. Nothing can be definitive about centuries-old texts.

But having said that nonetheless, what the exercise in this paper has achieved, or at least attempted to achieve, is to show and prove the point that, in the absence of definite historical records and *hadith* traditions that have been accepted with certainty as truly reliable and without contradictions, no historical or legal judgment should be passed without giving any leeway for competing positions and opinions. Any position taken based on verifiably reliable

records ought to be regarded with relative and not absolute certainty.

Both the Western and Muslim scholarships have suffered in their study of the Qur'an. One fundamental error that is often made in their approach to the Qur'an is to study it the way the Jewish and Christian Bibles were and are being studied. Here, Watt, for instance, believes that we have been looking at the Qur'an for too long as a non-biblical scripture, such that we look at the Qur'an not as the Qur'an but as a non-Bible. The problem starts, says Watt, when we look at the Qur'an as a non-Bible, then compare it with the Bible, and then reject it for being a non-Bible. What we should be doing is to evaluate and understand the Qur'an on its own terms (Watt, *Islamic Revelation*, 1–11). Another error is to assess the Qur'an in terms of modern standards in thinking and literary forms. This leads to the assumption that any difference or divergence that the Qur'an text is from the acceptable literary pattern and standard that we are so used to is regarded as the result of an extensive revision by Muhammad or the confusion and disruptive editing of the copyists of the Qur'an.

Conclusion

Revelations came to Muhammad as instructions and guidance. There were times when *re-revelation* or *revelatory alignment* happened due to the legal contingencies on the ground. Some revelations were also completely removed or withdrawn, and some were simply forgotten. When those revelations were later compiled and codified after Muhammad, all were incorporated into the written Qur'an, with the exception of those that had simply disappeared or forgotten. At the same time however, we cannot be certain if any of those revelations that had been "displaced" through *re-revelation* or *revelatory alignment* had been excluded from the Qur'an. It is under these circumstances that we try to make sense of *naskh*.

If *naskh* is understood simply as referring to the withdrawal of a ruling or a change in legal instruction, then the case of the change of the *Qiblah*, or Muhammad's treaty with the Makkans (the *muhadanaḥ*), or the practice of inheriting from one another between the *Ansars* and the *Muhajirs* (the *muhawalat*), where revelation came down in every of these instances to abrogate an existing practice, may be used to support this assumption.

If *naskh*, on the other hand implies the forgetting (*nisyan*) or the withdrawal (*raf'*) of a revelation, or its exclusion from the present Qur'an, then the cases of '*rajm*', '*rada*' and the missing revelations support this claim. The trouble with this understanding however is, Q. 2: 106, the report of Ubayy questioning the Prophet, and the exchange between 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr with 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, all suggest that *naskh* is not synonymous with forgetfulness, disappearance of revelations or the exclusion of revelatory texts from the Qur'an.

The most viable articulation of the definition of *naskh* in the Qur'an finds support especially in Q. 2: 106 and 16: 101, as well as most of the evidence from history. Under this definition, *naskh* is conceived as the *suppression and substitution of one Qur'anic ruling by another*. This notion requires the *supersession* of two revelations, both written and read in the Qur'an. According to this definition, *naskh* is not about the *orthographic* obliteration or the suppression of a revelatory text, or its exclusion from the official *mushaf*. *Naskh* is all about suspending a given Qur'anic legal stipulation. It is inconsequential, from this perspective, if particular verses of the Qur'an are still being read despite their abrogated status. The theory of *naskh* conceived as such has the potential to contribute further to our understanding of revelation and of the nature of sacred scriptures.

From the angle of *naskh*, it can be surmised that in the Islamic conception, revelation retains a sense of fluidity that is organically connected to mundane realities despite its

divine characteristic. When it comes to sacred scriptures, apparently, Islam does not require that the primary function of a sacred text is that it be used as a legal, philosophical or historical material. Rather, the essence of a sacred text lies simply in its ability, and hence, its function, to invoke in its readers and listeners, or believers, a sense of divine or sentient connection. We may consider this a liturgical interpretation of the text, and it is here that the idea of *symbolic language* (Paul Ricoeur, 1980, 4ff.) can be very useful.

As a revelatory and historical phenomenon, *naskh* seems to be firmly rooted in Islamic history. The concepts of '*re-revelation*', '*revelatory alignment*', and '*revelatory revision*' serve to prove this point. There are ample textual and historical evidence in support of this observation. There is however, an '*experiential gap*' that threatens this origin. To the first generation of Muslims, *naskh* was real, or at least we assume, it was real to them. It was an actual experience. Those Muslims got to experience *naskh* while revelation was still unfolding. Undoubtedly, this was the point of origin of *naskh*. To subsequent generations of Muslims, *naskh* has since become increasingly more 'theoretical' and 'interpretive'. In other words, in later times, *naskh* could only be directly interpreted and deciphered from existing texts, or apprehended from existing tradition of knowledge. From a single origin, we now have multiple origins of *naskh*. The further we are from the early generations of Muslims, the more illusive *naskh* gets. Today, we are more and more confronted by the '*cultural distance*' that exists between the reader and the text. This would often mean that *naskh* is textually understood not from its historical circumstances, but from the rational reading of what has since become the written Qur'an.

As a historical phenomenon, *naskh* is a reality, but as a theoretical construct, it is admittedly problematic. We may not find early scholars unanimously agreeing on any particular instance of *naskh*, and we certainly do not have to agree

on every or any particular alleged instance of *naskh* either, nor do we have to accept the arguments presented by them or even find the arguments intelligent and intelligible, but to say that *naskh* is not a valid conceptual category or that there is no evidence of *naskh* in the Qur'an is to oversimplify the argument. Disagreement among scholars on alleged instances of *naskh* is not a reason to deny *naskh*.

From the perspective of '*inzal al-wahy*' (the sending/coming down of revelation), *re-revelation* or *revelatory alignment* is essentially *naskh*. If, then, we were to assume that such a phenomenon did exist, the fact that it actually did, how are we to suppose that those revelations that had been abrogated had been excluded from the present Qur'an? Obviously, this should be the basis for the argument for *naskh*. The point to be made here is that, saying that *naskh* is an actual event whose phenomenon could be reflected in the relationships of some verses in the Qur'an, makes more sense, and has a greater validity and a higher probability of truth than denying *naskh* altogether or saying that *naskh* could have taken place but that the abrogated revelations never made it into the Qur'an.

The assumption and argument that the Qur'an was at times revealed to meet the changing circumstances of the Muslims throughout their revelatory period, and that, not only do we see changes in content and style in the Qur'an, but also in teachings too, signifies and affirms the idea of *naskh* in the legal vocabulary of Islam. The question is, could it have been the case that the reluctance to admit *naskh* in the Qur'an stems from the good intention of wanting to preserve the integrity of the Qur'an? Well, as the saying goes, good intentions do not always make good calls.

That *naskh* is a valid concept and that *naskh* in the Qur'an is true is a call I make with confidence. However *naskh* in the Qur'an is, in spite of everything, not *naskh* in the literal and explicit sense. Rather, all cases of abrogation have demonstrated that *naskh al-Qur'an* is

essentially an "*inferential*" or "*contextual*" *naskh* in the sense that it is dependent on '*mafhum al-mukhatabah*'. This is an important call.

We have seen the importance of *naskh* in determining the direction in which *fiqh* and *tafsir* could possibly take. We can also see the importance and significance of *naskh* in revealing to us the nature of *wahy* as much as it reveals to us the nature of the Qur'an and the history of its text. At the same time, we would also have noticed how our understanding of the nature of revelation and the Qur'an informs us of the nature of *naskh*. In other words, *naskh* is integral to the way revelation in Islam and the Qur'an are conceived and between *naskh* and the latter two, there is a reciprocal relationship.

The idea of '*re-revelation*' and '*revelatory alignment*' suggests the occurrence of *naskh*. Conversely, *naskh* has been very instructive in showing us how revelation had come down in line with the exigencies on the ground, so to speak. The incident with the blind 'Abd Allah ibn Umm Maktum typically speaks for this. From *naskh* too we get the idea that between two revelations that supersede one another, there had always been a pause in order to allow the legal intents of the both revelations to take effect before abrogation could take place. When such abrogation involves two verses from the same *surah*, it suggests a break or breaks within individual chapters thereby further suggesting that the chapters of the Qur'an were not always revealed as a whole as a single unit.

It is clear that the Qur'an influences the construction of *naskh* in many ways. For instance, it helps to define *naskh* as a pre-Qur'anic phenomenon, a conception that stems from the notion of the *abrogation of revelation*. The Qur'an also demonstrates that abrogated revelations may jolly well still be found and read within its text. Under such circumstances, we want to know what *naskh* in the Qur'an means to the Muslims today from the legal and exegetical standpoints.

A Muslim typically turns to the Qur'an for his understanding of the divine message and for provisions of the law in order to act accordingly. His knowledge of the *nasikh* and the *mansukh* will be indispensable to him. From his theological perspective, he usually sees the scripture as a "word frame for the sacred" that "mediates knowledge of truths," (Miriam Levering, 1989, 1). The problem in interpretation however is, "how does one relate the timeless truths captured in precept and story to the living experience of a different time?"

It is my opinion that the main issue that underscores our fundamental interest in interpretation today should not simply be how to understand classical texts that we may then conveniently transpose social-cultural models of the past into imposing models of and for today. Rather, our basic assumption and interest ought to be how we can relate to the "timeless truths" embodied in the text such that the articulation of such truths reflects our constant dialogical engagement with the text (in the Gadamerian sense) in a way that is interpretively meaningful to us. By definition, after all, the notion of "timeless truth" presupposes a continuous and persistent self-revealing of the text to its readers.

It is rather unfortunate that the exegetical rule that has governed the Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an has always been excessively rigid and dogmatic. The way past scholars have dealt with the issue of *naskh* clearly demonstrates this fact. To the extent that this is so, it tends to limit the dialogical constant encouraged by the Gadamerian hermeneutics. The Muslim exegetical rule of engagement has always begun with the assumption that the text is divine and, by extension, the rulings too. Both the text and the rulings are therefore immutable. It is precisely this idea of immutability that uncompromisingly fixes the Muslim notion of the timelessness of truth and of the Qur'an. The purpose, then, in trying to understand the Qur'an is primarily to know "exactly" what God says, so that Muslims could act "exactly" according to what God says, rather than what

the text truly should mean to us today. The primary interest here is God, the author of the text, and not the text itself. Under this rigidity, the Gadamerian emphasis of the text and not the author becomes less useful. And this is where the problem lies. The typical approach to the divine text tends to alienate the text from the Muslims, as much as it tends to alienate the Muslims from themselves. And what is often missed is the irony that no one can tell what God "exactly" wants and is saying. That is the true nature of interpretation.

The implication and consequences of the above exegetical worldview are far reaching. The fact that only the paradigm of *naskh* defines the validity of a legal text in the Qur'an limits the choices that Muslims have in looking into the viability of the laws suggested by the verses that still remain active. This in turn induces the rigidity that we find in the orientation of Muslim jurisprudence. Applying the theory of *naskh*, just as it was for them in the past, Muslims today continue with the tradition that, legal verses that are not under the purview of *naskh* or those verses that are not regarded as abrogated will continue to bear their legal force upon them. Traditionally, apart from the *naskh* channel, they have no other recourse to address the legal issues in the text.

The problem we are currently facing in Islamic jurisprudence is that the principle of adaptation is not as rigorously considered and applied as with the rigid and literal application of prescribed legal principles. The legal principle of '*al-asl fi'l amr lil' wujub*', which postulates that as a rule, every command conveys an obligation, for instance, when strictly understood and applied, conveys the idea that to not carry out what is commanded would be very sinful, and that is prohibited. This principle is essentially what defines the Muslims' attitude in approaching the Qur'an. But the problem is not with this principle; the problem is with the interpretation of the law. It seems, therefore, much rethinking and reformulation is needed in Islamic jurisprudence.

The theory of *naskh* deals with what has already been decided in the past. If it means anything, the study of *naskh* is the study of what classical scholars of Islam had to say about the doctrine of abrogation and about which verses of the present Qur'an is considered abrogated. If we have anything to say today, only so much could be said, and that would only be about the choices that we make in either accepting the validity of the doctrine or rejecting it, and that if we do accept it, whether we could agree on the abrogation of a particular revelation in the Qur'an or otherwise. Beyond these scopes, nothing new and nothing much could be said or added to the theory. *Naskh* is not about allowing itself to be appropriated as an interpretive tool to determine if there were other Qur'anic revelations that had not in the past been regarded as abrogated that could now be considered for abrogation. The restriction lies primarily in the reality that we are dealing with what is considered a divine revelation and a divine text, and that, if it had not already been indicated and explicitly expressed, no individual (not even Muhammad in the past) has the authority to change anything in the text or subject its rulings to changes or annulment.

That *naskh* is only about legal changes in the past and not about legal changes that may be constituted in the present, let alone in the future, makes *naskh* a *dead* 'theory'. As a *dead theory*, the relevance of *naskh* for us, and even perhaps for those in the future, goes as far as our present and future legal interests are served by whatever has been predetermined by the theory as an outcome of the long and exhausting discourse and legal wrangling conducted in the past. Beyond this scope, *naskh* is no longer relevant, and even if we want to, it is highly inadequate to serve and meet our changing needs.

Having said that, that *naskh* is a 'dead' theory and no longer relevant to us today does not, in itself, render *naskh* a non-valid concept or no longer useful. On the contrary, *naskh* is both a valid concept and a historical reality, and, to the extent that the interest of the study of *naskh* is to be served and met, the importance

of one's knowledge of the theory cannot be overstated. But what Muslims today could and should do is to not simply acquire the knowledge of the theory, but, and more importantly, also learn from the spirit and cues of *naskh*. It does not matter if the whole incident of *naskh* happened in the past. The fact remains that, as a reality, *naskh* presupposes the reality of the evolution of society and the evolution of law in Islam, and with it comes divine sanction. We should therefore take the hint from *naskh* and look at the law according to the more viable transformative model. This is an irony, but it is an irony that essentially prepares the Muslims intellectually and philosophically to embrace the idea of *contextualization*. In this sense, Islam notwithstanding, the law must be viewed and understood according to its context. There is always a danger and risk when someone *decontextualizes* the law. Hence, what we need is not *decontextualization*. What we need is the *demythologization* of the law, and hence, the text itself.

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