Examination of the View of John Burton Concerning the Relationship between Abrogation and Collection of the Qurʾān

Hamed Purrostami

1 Shiʿi Studies Department, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

Correspondence: Hamed Purrostami, Shiʿi Studies Department, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: Purrostami@ut.ac.ir

Received: December 26, 2016          Accepted: January 9, 2017          Online Published: February 21, 2017

doi:10.5539/res.v9n1p254          URL: http://doi.org/10.5539/res.v9n1p254

Abstract

The British Qurʾanic researcher, John Burton, believes that the extant Qurʾān was organised and approved by the Prophet of Islam himself. The role of the Prophet of Islam in collection and promulgation of the Qurʾān was negated in favour of the concept of abrogation. Abrogation of both wording and ruling and abrogation of wording, but not of ruling are ideas fabricated by Muslim jurists attempting to base their juristic decrees on the Qurʾānic text even though the Qurʾānic text lacked any reference to such decrees. If the Prophet of Islam had, in fact, edited, checked, and promulgated the Qurʾānic document, jurists could no longer speak of such omissions or abrogations of texts in the extant Qurʾān. Their solution was to falsify traditions in order to exclude the Prophet of Islam from the history of collection of the Qurʾānic text, suspending such collection until after his death. John Burton’s treatment of the relationship between abrogation and collection of the Qurʾān demonstrates the rigour of his research in Qurʾānic and Islamic sources. On the basis of his book, traditions dealing with collection of the Qurʾān developed in the third century AH. One thing he did not consider was whether historical evidence confirms his depiction of the development of these traditions.

Keywords: John Burton, abrogation, collection of the Qurʾān, jurists, Prophet of Islam

1. Introduction

In Qurʾānic sciences, a wide range of topics are examined including the history of the Qurʾān, which in turn subsumes the manner of the Qurʾānic revelation, conditions of revelation, differences in reading, and collection of the Qurʾān. Qurʾānic scholars have invested considerable effort in the latter. A few research questions in this area are as follows. Considering its scattered verses revealed in different times and places, in what time and manner was the Qurʾān collected in the form of a book with a specific beginning and end? Did Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, himself conduct and manage this important task or did his posterity, the Caliphs, do so? How have abrogation and juristic decrees influenced the collection of the Qurʾān?

John Burton is among the Qurʾānic researchers to have examined such questions. The present study utilises a descriptive and analytical method to answer the following questions.

What is the view of John Burton on the relationship between abrogation and collection of the Qurʾān?

To what extent does Islam support his view?

2. Meaning of Abrogation

Every progressive and corrective movement necessitates successive stages, changes in conditions, re-examination of programmes, and abrogation of some practices. Such revisions and invalidations also occur in divine religions—which provide comprehensive programmes for human life. Certainly, this holds true only to the extent that the movement has not reached perfection. Therefore, at most, abrogation can exist in a religion as long as the Prophet is engaged in his divine mission. With the conclusion of the mission and death of the Prophet, indicating the perfection of the religion, no room remains for abrogation in the religion.

Successive abrogation in a new religion is comparable to varying prescriptions of a medical practitioner which change as a result of changes in the patient’s status and circumstances. Yesterday’s prescription was useful at the time, and today’s prescription is so as well. Consider ing this analogy, every abrogation is correct and most appropriate in its own situation and conditions. The term naskh—the Arabic term corresponding to abrogation is
defined as “Withdrawal of a decree, apparently in perpetuity, through pronouncement of a new decree such that the new decree takes the place of the former with no possibility of concurrence” (Ma‘rifat, 2010, pp. 102-103).

3. The Relationship between Abrogation and Collection of the Qur’an

The most important idea of John Burton concerning collection of the Qur’an is that the Qur’an that is currently in our hands was organised by the Prophet of Islam (Burton, 1977, pp. 231-240). According to Burton, traditions indicating that the Qur’an was collected after the Prophet of Islam passed away were falsified by some Muslim jurists.

They used the concept of abrogation to accredit to the Qur’an some juristic decrees that could not be found in the present Qur’an. This approach required the Prophet’s role in collection of the Qur’an to be erased, and the history of the collection to be deferred to after his death. Thus, Burton sees abrogation as the reason why collection of the Qur’an was not attributed to the Prophet (Burton, 1977, pp. 18-19, p. 134, pp. 160-166, pp. 174-187, pp. 197-199).

Most Islamic schools are of the belief that the punishment for adultery under specific circumstances is stoning. However, it is known that this punishment is not pronounced in the present Qur’an, but is rather in complete contradiction to it. Verse 15 of the Qur’anic chapter Nisā’ discusses adultery, declaring its punishment to be life imprisonment (Burton, 1977, p. 72). On the other hand, stoning was a tradition of the Prophet of Islam (Burton, 1977, pp. 71-86, pp. 89-91). We are thus faced with two contradicting forms of punishment for adultery, one according to the Qur’an and the other in accordance with tradition. Some Muslim jurists are of the belief that tradition abrogates the Qur’an in this case (Burton, 1977, pp. 90-91, p. 106).

In order to defend tradition and the intellectual movements of his time, Shafi‘i had no choice but to propose the notions that the Qur’an had superseded the Qur’an, and that tradition had superseded tradition, but not the Qur’an (Burton, 1977, p. 18, p. 30, pp. 52-55). He was forced to concur with the stoning penalty due to its existence in Islamic jurisprudence. Despite this, he denied that tradition abrogates the Qur’an. He struggled to demonstrate that stoning was derived from tradition, which has not abrogated the Qur’an, but has provided its “ideal exegesis” (Burton, 1977, p. 25, pp. 73-74, pp. 89-92). This view is destined to defeat since in the case of adultery, tradition has superseded the Qur’an (Burton, 1977, p. 92).

After Shafi‘i, proponents of his ideas were divided into two groups concerning his belief that tradition had not abrogated the Qur’an. One group refuted his theory, considering the stoning punishment to be evidence demonstrating abrogation of the Qur’an by tradition (Burton, 1977, p. 92). The other accepted the theory and established the Qur’an as the authority concerning the decree of stoning (Burton, 1977, p. 11).

The latter regarded this decree as an example of the Qur’an abrogating the Qur’an. Even though the second group admitted that there was no indication of the stoning penalty in the extant Qur’an, they argued that it must have been mentioned in the Qur’an at some time (Burton, 1977, pp. 91-93). They sought to somehow attribute the penalty, which was originally based in tradition, to the Qur’an (Burton, 1977, p. 184). With this purpose, referring to verse 52 of the Qur’anic chapter Hajj, they identified one of the meanings of abrogation to be omission (Burton, 1977, pp. 62-64, p. 235). Next, they claimed that omission or abrogation in Qur’anic verses can take the following forms (Burton, 1977, p. 131).

4. Abrogation in Both Wording and Ruling

The wording and ruling of some Qur’anic verses were withdrawn after their revelation. Hence, they were not entered into the extant Qur’an, and in effect, omitted (Burton, 1977, pp. 46-49). Expounders of this type of abrogation fabricated narrations to support their claims (see below).

a. In the two Šahībs, Anas is quoted as saying, “There was revealed concerning those slain at Bīr Ma‘ānāh a Qur’an verse which we recited until it was withdrawn” (Burton, 1977, pp. 48-49, p. 130).

b. Ubayy ibn Ka‘b asked Zirr ibn Ḥubaysh, “How many verses do you recite in chapter Azzhāb?” Zirr replied, “Seventy-three verses”. Ubayy asked if that was all. “I have seen it,” he said, “when it was the same length as Baqrarah” (Burton, 1977, p. 80, p. 130).

c. Abū Mūsā Ash‘ār reports, “There was revealed a chapter the like of Barā‘ah, but it was later withdrawn” (Burton, 1977, p. 83).

d. Āyishah reported, “In what was revealed, ten attested sucklings were required to establish the ban. The ten were later replaced by five” (Burton, 1977, p. 87). This refers to the bans on marriage as a result of breast-feeding a child that is not one’s own.
5. Abrogation in Wording, but not in Ruling

The rulings of some Qurʾānic verses remain even though their wordings were suppressed (Burton, 1977, pp. 68-89, p. 232). Jurists who support the idea that tradition does not abrogate the Qurʾān, attribute the stoning decree to the Qurʾān on the basis of this type of abrogation (Burton, 1977, pp. 68-98). They made the verse, “The old man and the old woman, when they fornicate, stone them outright”, and claim it as the source of the stoning decree. Then, since the wording of this verse was abrogated, it was not entered into the extant Qurʾān, even though its ruling continues to be applicable (Burton, 1977, pp. 77-86, pp. 94-104, pp. 108-109). They consider this Qurʾānic decree to have abrogated verse 15 of sura Nīsāʾ (Burton, 1977, p. 107).

The aim of the jurists who proposed these two types of abrogation in wording was to prove that there exists a Qurʾān above and beyond the extant Qurʾān. Accordingly, lack of evidence for juristic decrees in the extant Qurʾān was not sufficient justification that such decrees were not based on the Qurʾān. They claimed this was because the current Qurʾān was not all-inclusive of the true Qurʾān. Some Qurʾānic verses were omitted from the extant Qurʾān due these two types of abrogation of wording (Burton, 1977, pp. 62-64, pp. 66-67).

These jurists created an imaginary Qurʾān that was longer than the present Qurʾān (Burton, 1977, pp. 105-112, pp. 121-122). They referenced this imaginary Qurʾān to attribute juristic decrees that were not in fact Qurʾānic to the Qurʾān (Burton, 1977, pp. 71-89). After these jurists demonstrated the omission of texts from the present Qurʾān and posited some ostensibly omitted part as proof of some juristic decrees, they encountered another problem: the Prophet of Islam’s participation in collection of the Qurʾān. If the Prophet of Islam had in fact collected the Qurʾān, the idea that parts of the Qurʾān were withdrawn in the form of the two types of abrogation was no longer feasible (Burton, 1977, pp. 109-111). In such a case, these jurists could no longer make use of these omitted texts to attribute their decrees to the Qurʾān. They chose to solve this problem by excluding the Prophet of Islam from all stages of preparation and promulgation of the Qurʾān (Burton, 1977, pp. 131-132). Therefore, they argued that Qurʾānic verses were continuously subject to abrogation during the Prophet of Islam’s lifetime. According to them, the final text of the Qurʾān would only be fixed when revelation of the Qurʾān ceased. This would only occur after the death of the Prophet.

The final result of Qurʾānic revelation would thus only become clear after the passing of the Prophet, and only then could the Qurʾān be collected. These jurists believed that if the Prophet of Islam had collected the Qurʾānic verses in the form of a single codex, it was possible that some verses would later be withdrawn from the Qurʾān since abrogation was a continuous occurrence. This would lead to confusion of the Muslims, who would adopt the Qurʾān collected by the Prophet of Islam. In order to prevent such confusion, the Qurʾān had to have been collected after the lifetime of the Prophet (Burton, 1977, pp. 130-135, pp. 160-166, pp. 198-199, pp. 231-239).

With the exclusion of the Prophet, these jurists were faced with the question that if the Prophet did not collect the Qurʾān, then who did?

In order to answer this question, they once more proceeded to falsify narrations according to which individuals were named who collected the Qurʾān with various motivations (Burton, 1977, pp. 118-119, pp. 120-127, pp. 136-137, pp. 139-140, p. 160, p. 187, pp. 158-232).

Burton believes that the concept of “abrogation of wording, but not of ruling” was the reason why some Muslim jurists discussed collection of the Qurʾān after the period of the Prophet (Burton, 1977, p. 134, p. 232). According to Burton, this concept is exemplified in the verse of stoning and that of the five sucklings, by use which the aforementioned Muslim jurists attributed the decrees of stoning and nursing to the Qurʾān (Burton, 1977, pp. 68-89). A question that must be asked of Burton is whether it is logical for some Muslim jurists to extensively falsify narrations in order to attribute a few decrees to the Qurʾān. It seems that Burton’s theory in this regard is merely a claim without sufficient scientific support.


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6. Prudence

Considering that the Qurʾān was the foundation of the Prophet’s invitation and included statutes from God, if the Prophet neglected the Qurʾān and failed to collect it, he would be acting imprudently and injudiciously. Such neglect would be strange even for a common Muslim, let alone the Prophet of Islam, who was God’s messenger for the people (Ibn Ṭāwūṣ, 1984, pp. 192-193; Bāqillānī, 1971, p. 99).

The Prophet commanded Muslims to record God’s revelations in writing (Shaḥīn, 2005, p. 97; Šuhbī Şālīh, 1979, p. 69). He also prescribed, “Preserve knowledge by putting it in writing” (Kaḥīf Baghdāfī, 2001, pp. 68-69). Is it possible for the Prophet of Islam to have been remiss in recording and collecting the Qurʾān? Such an occurrence would be very improbable. Considering the conditions of the Arabian Peninsula and the possibility of the loss of the Qurʾān, how could it be possible for the Prophet of Islam to have given no importance to recording of the Qurʾān such that Zayd ibn Thābit would have to collect the Qurʾān from people’s memories? (Ja’fariyān, 1994, p. 35). Again, this is very hard to believe.

Those who know of the Prophet’s supreme wisdom, his utmost concern for the Qurʾān, and his forethought and foresight will acknowledge that it would be impossible for the Prophet of Islam to have left the Qurʾān in fragmented form (Mūsawī, 1995, p. 29).

7. Fundamentality of the Qurʾān in Islam

Historians have written that Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, had special scribes for recording information on a variety of topics including treaties, date palm yield, and loans. He even commanded them to record the names of all those who had converted to Islam prior to the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah. Furthermore, Muslim armies had scribes who recorded military issues including the names of individuals chosen to participate in battles. It does not seem logical for the Prophet of Islam, who considered the recording of this information important, to have overlooked physical documentation of the Qurʾān, the foundation of Islam. Certainly, the recording of loans could not have been of greater importance to the Prophet than the recording of the Book of God. Even a layman could not be expected to make such a mistake, let alone the Prophet of Islam who was a highly prudent individual (Āmilī, 1989, pp. 81-82). The Prophet of Islam and his Companions placed extraordinary importance on recording the Qurʾān. It is doubtful that such importance would fall short in terms of arrangement, sequence, and comprehensive coverage of this divine book. It is further unlikely for one to be faithful to revelation to the point of death, considering it to be the greatest blessing of God, while disregarding its organisation and compilation. It cannot be conceived that the Prophet of Islam, who took great pains to teach and record the Qurʾān, was indifferent to its collection, especially considering that communicating it was his divine appointment and that it is to be the foundation of human civilisation until the end of time (Rāmūrī, 2001, pp. 294-295; Ḥujjāfī, 2005, pp. 223-224).

Collection and promulgation of the Qurʾān was among the greatest responsibilities of the early Muslims as the Qurʾān was the greatest miracle of the Prophet of Islam as well as the most important evidence for his prophethood. In addition, the Qurʾān is the basis of Islam and the source of its laws (Ṣūṭṭān al-Wāʿīzīn Shīrāzī, 1978, p. 258).

8. Umar’s Statement during the Passing of the Prophet

Before he passed away, Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, stated, “Bring an ink bottle and a pen so that I may write something by which you will not be misled after me!” Umar ibn Khāṭāb replied, “The Book of God is sufficient for us”.

This would necessitate that the Book of God was in a clear, collected, and fixed form at that time so that Muslims could refer to it; otherwise, it could not be sufficient (Rāmūrī, 2001, p. 288).

Umar’s reply indicates that the Qurʾān was in collected and ordered form such that it was recognised among the Companions as a book. For this reason, when ‘Umar called it a book, no one protested the designation or asked him what or where this presumed book was (Ṣūṭṭān al-Wāʿīzīn Shīrāzī, 1978, p. 262).

9. Qurʾānic Evidence

Many Qurʾānic verses indicate that the Qurʾān was written and collected in organised form during the Prophet’s lifetime. Some of these verses are as follows.

The Qur’ān was always the greatest point of contention between the Prophet and the disbelievers in Mecca. They were fully aware and knowledgeable about verses of the Qur’ān and what the Prophet promulgated. Both disbelievers and Muslims possessed the verses of the Qur’ān—the disbelievers for awareness of the Prophet’s promulgation and the Muslims for learning and reflection. The disbelievers would claim that the verses of the Qur’ān were legends of the ancients written down by the Prophet, who was dictated to night and day. This indicates the fact that there were writings which were regularly dictated to the Prophet, ostensibly on the basis of ancient legends (Rāmyār, 2001, p. 282). This verse demonstrates the fact that Qur’ānic verses and chapters were collated as they were gradually revealed and collected in manuscripts to be recited for the people. Based on this fact, the disbelievers claimed that the Prophet of Islam copied from ancient legends (Darwazah, 2007, p. 97).


Clearly, considering that the Prophet of Islam challenged the disbelievers to create ten chapters like the Qur’ān while still in Mecca (chapter Hūd (Q. 11) was revealed in Mecca, circa the ninth year after the appointment of the Prophet, four years prior to his immigration Medina), the Qur’ān had been written and collected into a codex that was available to the disbelievers. Only on this basis would it be reasonable for the Qur’ān to make such a challenge. This compendium of over 3,400 verses, which had been revealed up to that time, had to be available to the disbelievers in its entirety for such a challenge to be valid. They had to know what they were being challenged to do, and have the like of what they were being challenged to create. Otherwise, the challenge would be a meaningless test to do something unknown. On this basis, at the very least, it can be claimed that the Qur’ān was collected in written form since the eighth and ninth years after the Prophet’s appointment, prior even to the Hegira (Rāmyār, 2001, pp. 282-283; Ḥūḥī, 1975, p. 271).


These verses indicate that the Prophet of Islam was concerned that he would omit a letter, word, or concept from revelation. Hence, he would hurry to dictate the verses to Qur’ānic scribes so that it would become an indisputable text without possibility of addition, reduction, or change in arrangement. These verses also demonstrate that the Prophet of Islam would engage in collation and collection of Qur’ānic verses immediately after they were revealed, even verses that were directly addressing him and that explained the manner of complete understanding and reception of revelation. He commanded the scribes of revelation to record even such verses in the exact same form in which they were revealed from God. In addition, considering that chapter Qiyāmah (p. 75) was among the first to be revealed in Mecca, these verses signify that the Prophet of Islam did this from early on in his appointment (Darwazah, 2007, pp. 92-93).

10. Conclusion

1) According to Burton, the Qur’ān that is currently available was collected by the Prophet in his own period.

2) Burton believes that abrogation is the reason why the Prophet’s role was removed from the history of the collection of the Qur’ān.

3) The ideas of abrogation of wording and ruling as well as abrogation of wording but not of ruling, in Burton’s view, have no basis in fact, having been formulated by Muslim jurists trying to attribute juristic decrees lacking Qur’ānic evidence to the Qur’ān. If they had accepted that the Prophet of Islam had in fact collected and collated all Qur’ānic verses in a single codex, these jurists would not have been able to talk of withdrawal or omission of passages from the extant Qur’ān in the form of these two types of abrogation in wording. The solution they conceived of and executed was to falsify narrations in order to remove the Prophet of Islam’s role from the history of collection of the Qur’ān, deferring its collection to after the Prophet’s lifetime.

4) Considering Burton’s writings, his methodology for analysis of the relationship between abrogation and narrations concerning collection of the Qur’ān involves the Qur’ān as having first and foremost priority as a
source for religious teachings and juristic decrees for Muslims. On this basis, contrary to other Western researchers, Burton’s methodology does not involve the view that the Qur’an is merely an eternal literary classic. 5) Burton’s view concerning collection of the Qur’an during the lifetime of the Prophet of Islam is correct, but not on the basis of the reasons he provided in his study. Rather, it is correct on the basis of rational, historical, and Qur’ânic evidence derived from Islamic and Qur’ânic sources.

6) The information provided by Burton concerning the relationship between abrogation and collection of the Qur’an indicates that narrations of Qur’ânic collection were developed and perfected in the third year of the Hegira. However, he did not explain whether any historical source or evidence confirms his depiction of the development of these narrations.

References


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