

Article

Naskh (“Abrogation”) in Muslim Anti-Jewish Polemic: The Treatise of Rashīd al-Dīn Hamadānī (1247–1318)

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Abstract: A strong case can be made that the concept of naskh, “abrogation” or “annulment”, was the most potent weapon in the arsenal of Muslim polemicists seeking to convert Jews (Burton’s *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān* is highly informative but deals almost exclusively with naskh in its internal Islamic contexts, e.g., hermeneutics and legal theory). *Naskh* did not necessarily involve any rejection of Jewish scripture or tradition as fraudulent or corrupt. It rested on the simple premise, explicitly confirmed by the Qur’an, that the deity may alter or replace His legislation over the course of time. In the first part of this paper, I will briefly review the topic, adding some texts and observations that, to the best of my knowledge, have not appeared in the academic literature (comprehensively surveyed in Adang’s *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, 1996; also in Adang and Schmidtke’s *Polemics (Muslim-Jewish) in Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, 2010). The bulk of this paper will consist of a fairly detailed summary of an unpublished tract on *naskh* written by Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍlullāh Hamadānī (RD) (1247–1318), himself a Jewish convert to Islam and a monumental politician, cultural broker, historian, and author.

Keywords: Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍlullāh; naskh (abrogation); polemics (Muslim-Jewish)



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1. Observations and Texts on Naskh

Proof texts drawn directly from the Torah were not hard to find; for example, they can be found in the ever-restricting series of legislation concerning forbidden foods from the time of Adam to the time of Moses or in the practice of marrying two sisters, which Jacob committed legally but which was later prohibited. Maimonides made the rejection of *naskh* the centerpiece of his famous thirteen principles; indeed, in my view, the often violent conversion pressures of the Almohads were the main reason that Maimonides drew up this list.¹ One of the earliest (if not the earliest) exemplars of Jewish anti-Muslim polemics, penned by Shmuel ben Ḥofni Gaon (d. 1034), was a treatise on the abrogation of the law (*naskh al-shar’*), which unfortunately is only partially preserved (Sklare 1996, pp. 28–29).

Responses to the *naskh*-based polemics are embedded even in non-polemical Jewish texts, attesting to the deep inroads that the topic had made into Jewish consciousness. For example, the philologist Yonah Ibn Janāḥ (d. 1055), in *Kitāb al-Luma’*, the first part of his chef d’oeuvre *Kitāb al-Taṣṭīḥ*, offers two resolutions to the apparent contradiction in the biblical story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). The narrative opens with God’s command to offer Isaac as a burnt offering (Gen 22:1), but that order is nullified in verse 12. Such reversals of divine commands are precisely what the Muslim polemicists pointed to when speaking of *naskh*. Ibn Janāḥ remarks that his explanations “will rebut for us the confusion on the part of those who use it [this abrogation] in order to force us to replace our Torah”.²

One should not be misled into thinking, however, that discussions of *naskh* are limited to religious polemics. *Al-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh* (“the abrogator and the abrogated”) has an important place in traditional Qur’anic studies. Qur’an 2:106 states clearly that God may abrogate a Qur’anic verse (*āya*, literally “sign”), only to replace it with something better, “No sign do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but that We bring that which is better than it or like unto it. Dost thou not know that God is Powerful over all things?”³ The Qur’an’s

recognition that God may abrogate a verse, only to replace it with something better, allowed interpreters of the Qur'an to solve contradictions within the Qur'an in a direct manner: a later revelation, *al-nāsikh*, abrogates an earlier revelation, *al-mansūkh*.⁴ Didactic reasons were supplied as to why the Qur'an nevertheless retained the earlier revelation, even though it no longer had normative force. Interpreters, of course, debated whether a certain verse was abrogated or not. Al-Zamakhshari reports that the verse cited above was revealed in response to complaints to the Prophet that Allāh was always changing His legislation; He would command something today and retract it tomorrow or forbid something, only later to allow it.⁵ It is possible that a complaint of this sort motivated response from Samau'al al-Maghribī (d.c. 1180; [Perlmann 1964](#), p. 34), a Jewish convert to Islam who penned a vociferous repudiation of his former faith, "If they say that the wise one [God] does not prohibit a thing, later to permit it . . . the answer is that one who commands a thing and its opposite at two different points in time does not contradict himself in his command . . .".

In the course of his chapter on *al-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh* al-Suyūṭī casually notes that Jews reject the idea of Scripture abrogating itself as if this belongs under the rubric of Qur'anic interpretation rather than polemic.⁶ Are Jews joining Muslims in an interfaith discussion on legitimate hermeneutical methods rather than defending themselves against Muslim polemicists? In fact, new converts (presumably Jews and Christians) continued to oppose *naskh* even after joining the Muslim community. Al-Qurṭubī, in his discussion in Qur'an 2:106 (<Altafsir.com - تفسير آيات القرآن الكريم (5-1-106-2)>), observes that abrogation is rejected by "groups of people who have recently joined Islam (*ṭawā'if min al-muntamīn li-l-islām al-muta'akharīn*)" as well as groups (but not the entirety of) Jews. The claim of those Jews is refuted by several examples, for instance, the permission given to Noah's descendants to consume all forms of living flesh, later restricted by the Mosaic dietary rules, or—once again—God's rescinding His command to Abraham to slaughter his son. His calm presentation of a list of biblical legislation whose abrogation is unchallenged within the Jewish tradition reads as a scholarly analysis rather than a polemical invective, and his well-reasoned and striking conclusion explicitly applies to all religious traditions:

"This [divine abrogation] is not a chapter in caprice, but rather taking the servants from one [level of] worship to another, and one law to another, for the purpose of some improvement, making His wisdom manifest and perfecting His kingdom. There is no disagreement among intellectuals: the law codes of the prophets were intended for the spiritual and material betterment of humankind. Caprice would have been necessarily involved only on the part of someone who did not know how things develop. However, someone who does have knowledge of that will alter his preaching as the [type of needed] improvements change, just like the doctor who attends to the circumstances of his patient. So also does He attend to His creation, by His will and choice, there is no god other than Him! His discourse is replaced, but His knowledge and will do not change; indeed, that is impossible with regard to God Most High".

Naskh, within the Qur'an, impacted relations with Jews and Christians in another way. The Qur'an repeatedly expresses toleration toward "unbelievers"—in 114 verses, by one count—yet fanatics claim that all of those verses are abrogated by the "Sword Verse" in Qur'an 9:5 ("Kill the unbelievers wherever you find them"). The debate concerning the "Sword Verse" continues into modern times ([Krawulsky 2011](#), pp. 112–17). Finally, it should be noted that some Jewish sectarians accepted *naskh* ([Lasker 1995](#), p. 170 n. 17).

From the Risāla of Rashīd al-Dīn

The life and cultural contributions of RD seem beyond the capacity of an ordinary human being. I do not have room here even for a brief recap; fortunately, I can refer to some recent publications that offer insights into a good part of his accomplishments ([Krawulsky 2011](#); [Akasoy et al. 2013](#); [Kamola 2019](#); [Brack 2023](#)). RD was himself a convert from Judaism to Islam. Beyond whatever motivations of converts he may have had for criticizing, or even besmirching, his ancestral faith, Rashīd al-Dīn had solid reasons for writing the essay that I

am about to summarize. His imperial Mongol patron, Öldjejtü, had a strong interest in religion and commissioned Rashīd al-Dīn to write a commentary on some verses from the Qur'an. In the year 1306, the Prophet Muhammad appeared to Rashīd al-Dīn in a dream and encouraged him to begin his commentary (Krawulsky 2011, p. 80). The treatise on *naskh* is labeled as an appendix (*dhayl*) to the essay on chapter 109 of the Qur'an, *al-Kāfirūn* ("The non-believers"). I do not have access to the commentary on chapter 109, and my study is limited to the appendix, a stand-alone tract in its own right. In the appendix, RD professes to solidify and reinforce the arguments already broached in this essay.

These essays (*rasā'il*) were written in Persian. RD promptly asked one Taqī al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī to translate them into Arabic. The final product consisted of two extraordinarily beautiful codices, one in Persian and the other in Arabic; both can claim to be "originals".⁷ The Persian copy, however, was lost sometime in the mid-twentieth century. The Arabic copy is safely housed in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, where it is listed as MS arabe 2324; the treatise of interest occupies ff. 111a–117b, and it was copied in 710 A.H./1310 C.E.⁸ I have based my study on the Paris manuscript (henceforth P), along with MS Istanbul, Kılıç Ali Pasha 835/854 (henceforth K), which proved useful, as the writing in the Paris manuscript is quite cramped. I register folio numbers for K; for P, I further locate the passages by T(op), M(iddle), or B(ottom). Obviously, my work thus far has not resulted in anything approaching an edition.⁹ The importance of RD's perspectives justifies the publication here of my extensive notes and occasional deeper dives, which, I certainly hope, will motivate additional and more thorough work on the text.

RD presents this essay as mostly original research. Though he modestly refers to himself by cognomens such as *hādha al-ḍa'if* ("this weakling"), he occasionally expresses astonishment that he has arrived at insights that no one else has detected on this well-traveled polemical path. The discussion is organized systematically in a tree-like structure, with the divisions of his study divided into sections dubbed *aqsām*, subsections called *wujūh*, and sub-subsections labeled *anwā'*. This essay is also organized chronologically, dealing first with *naskh* as applied to pre-Mosaic laws, notably, with those associated with standout Prophets Adam, Noah, and Abraham; then *naskh* as evident from internal contradictions or alterations within Mosaic legislation; and finally, evidence that the Jewish tradition foretold its future wholesale *naskh*.

Some of the issues and related verses that Rashīd cites are famous features of Muslim-Jewish polemics, though they do not truly involve *naskh*. A good example is the verse from the Qur'an 61:6, which states, "And [remember] when Jesus son of Mary said, 'O Children of Israel! Truly I am the Messenger of God unto you, confirming that which came before me in the Torah and bearing glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me whose name is Ahmad'". At least on the face of it, the verse avers that Jesus came only to confirm the Torah, and for that reason, the Jews should have accepted him; hence, one could reasonably suppose that "Aḥmad" would not invalidate the Torah.¹⁰

RD finds in Genesis 17:20, which announces Ishmael's future greatness, a hint of the prophet's name as it appears in the Qur'anic verse cited above (Aḥmad).¹¹ This hint is revealed by applying *gematria* (the alphanumeric equivalents of the Hebrew letters), a hermeneutic that, according to RD, plays a mammoth role in Jewish biblical interpretation. He states, "... the science of letters (*ilm al-ḥurūf*) which is as highly regarded as can be (*mu'tabar^{am} ghāyat al-i'tibār*) among the Jews. They base many laws upon it. This computation is called in their language *gematriyā*" (P 115a M; K 214b). RD's discussion is lengthy, but eventually, he correctly calculates that the Hebrew *bi-me'od me'od* has the alphanumeric value of ninety-two, the same as Muḥammad (the *shadda* on the second *mīm* does not double its value).

Note that this is the application of a Jewish hermeneutic, not a Muslim polemical ploy. For this reason, Rashīd declares that the Jews have known full well that the name of the Prophet of Islam is found in the Torah. Indeed, this particular polemic appears to have originated among Jewish converts to Islam. Maimonides says as much in his mocking dismissal of this proof, which was spread among the Jews of Yemen by an

unnamed apostate, “Neither the untutored multitudes nor the apostates themselves who delude others with them, believe in them or entertain any illusions about them. Their [the apostates’] sole purpose in citing these verses is to win favor in the eyes of the gentiles by demonstrating that they believe the statement of the Koran that Muhammad was mentioned in the Torah. But the Muslims themselves do not accept these arguments; they do not admit them nor cite them because they are manifestly fallacious”.¹²

The earliest occurrence of the argument from *gematria* may, in fact, be from the polemical tract of Samau’al al-Maghrabī, mentioned above, who was a talented mathematician.¹³ However, I see no direct connection between Samau’al’s tract and RD.

RD does not, as a rule, rebut Jewish counter-polemics. One exception concerns the verse from Deuteronomy 18:15, where Moses promises, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen”, which he views as one more proof text that Moses had prophesied the coming of Muhammad (P 114b T; K 213a). This verse, which looms large in RD’s essay, does not appear to have played a major role in Muslim–Jewish polemics; according to the list compiled in (Adang 1996, p. 264), the one Muslim polemicist to cite this verse is ‘Alī ibn Rabbān al-Ṭabarī, according to whom, “from your brethren” excludes Jews, limiting the choice to non-Israelites who are “brethren”.¹⁴ However, he knows that the Jews reject this argument on the grounds that the verse specifies “your brothers”, a qualification that does not apply to Muhammad. RD counters the Jewish objection with Deuteronomy 2:4, where the offsprings of Esau are called “your brothers”, and Deut. 22:8, where the Torah calls the Edomite “your brother”. RD suggests that the Biblical term refers to the children of your brother, that is, a cousin rather than a brother; this, he avers, is the conventional usage of the term in Arabic (*al-muṣṭalaḥ fī ‘ibarāt al-nās*). Ibn Janāḥ, who, as we have seen, is sensitive to Muslim polemics, does not address this verse specifically, as far as I have seen. However, in his dictionary, he lists meanings for the Hebrew *‘aḥ*, “brother”, ranging from men having the same father and mother to the brotherhood of man (for the latter, he cites Gen. 9:5).¹⁵ At the very least, this disallows the more limited meaning given to the phrase in Deut. 18:15 by Ibn Rabbān.

There are indications, though not many, that RD had some acquaintance with Jewish traditional interpretations. Thus, for instance, in his long analysis of Deuteronomy 18:15, he notes that “some Israelites” are of the opinion that Ayyūb (Job) was a contemporary of Moses (P 114b M; K 213b); this view is recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 15a.

For most of the cases that are raised in his polemic, RD finds not only the *mansūkh*, the abrogated verse, but also its *nāsikh*, or abrogating verse, in the Hebrew Bible rather than in the Qur’an. This mirrors the situation in Qur’anic exegesis where, as we have seen, *al-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh* constitutes a well-defined field of inquiry, and the abrogating verse along with the one abrogated are both found in the same scripture. But this is not always the case. RD alleges that the calendar that is now determined by a fixed algorithm is purely a concoction of the Jews. He mistakenly claims that the Torah legislates fixing the calendar by observation, noting that the Jews have abrogated this practice without warrant from Scripture. RD adds that a few Jews reject this calendar. A reference elsewhere to the view of “a few Jews (*qalīl min al-yahūd*)” likely applies to the Karaites, though it is by no means certain that RD knew of the existence of this sect. (see P 115b T; K 216a-b).

RD makes much of the Torah’s describing God’s regret or remorse at some action, using Hebrew forms built from the root *n.ḥ.m.* Such usages, for example, in Genesis 6:7, where God ostensibly regrets having made humankind, do not indicate the abrogation of a specific legislation. Instead, they establish the theological principle that the deity does change His mind, so to speak, thus bolstering the theoretical underpinning of *naskh*. Jewish scholars were not oblivious to this issue. Sa’adya deliberately avoided this interpretation of *niḥamti* in Genesis 6:7, which he translates as *tawā’adatuhum*, “I threatened them” or “I warned them”.¹⁶ In my view, he has deliberately chosen this meaning from among the seven possibilities that he lists for *n.ḥ.m.* in order to avoid any opening for *naskh*. Taken in context, the full Hebrew phrase *ki niḥamti ki ‘asitim* thus means “I warned them when I

created them". In other words, humanity had been warned from the outset that depravity of the sort into which humanity had sunk would be punished by destruction, and now the day of reckoning has come. Sa'adya thus steers clear of the polemical challenges posed by the difficult verse whose theological implications had exercised commentators at least since Philo, as Zucker informs us in his note.

For his part, RD insists that the Hebrew root in question signifies *nidāma*, remorse. He further avers that "the presence of the divine glory (*ḥadrat al-'izza*) is far above remorse", yet Jews and Christians tenaciously insist upon ascribing *nidāma* to the deity. He adduces scriptural proof texts, all of which contain the forms of *n.h.m.* and presses his attack: "Seeing that these verses which belong to the text of the Torah and the belief system (*mu'taqad*) of the Jews pronounce *nidāma* with regard to[both] humanity and [divine] action, the Jews simply must remonstrate themselves. They ought to denounce themselves and their book by way of *nidāma* and *naskh*, rather than the religion of Islam. Indeed, the Islamic peoples do not ascribe to God *nidāma* in either word or deed. There is not a single verse of the Qur'an which mentions *nidāma*. But the Torah and Gospel have many verses, in addition to those that we mentioned, which mention *nidāma*" (P, 112b M; K, 216b). All such verses fall under the rubric of *nāsikh wa-mansūkh*, and they are all abrogated and invalidated by the doctrinally more proper Qur'an. The abrogation of these verses argues for the abrogation of the Torah in its entirety.

RD meshes Qur'an 3:93 into a sketch constructed upon several verses from Genesis in order to produce an integrated narrative of the accumulation of more and more restrictions with regard to forbidden foods. Though Genesis 1:29 implies that Adam was allowed only a vegetarian diet, no food (other than the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge) was explicitly prohibited for him. Noah was allowed to eat all animals, fish, and fowl; however, he was prohibited from consuming blood [Genesis 9:3–4]. Abraham must have received additional restrictions that were recorded in his *maṣḥaf* (written copy of the divine revelation) and which were still observed by the "Hebrews", who could not share a meal with the Egyptians [Genesis 43:32]. The "Hebrews", RD points out, denote a more numerous collective than the "Children of Israel", who, according to Qur'an 3:93, adhered to a new prohibition instituted by their father Isrā'īl (Jacob). It has been suggested that the Qur'anic verse refers to the *gid ha-nasheh* (sciatic nerve) [Genesis 32:33].¹⁷

The soundest way to rebut an opponent, says Rashīd al-Dīn, is to present him with evidence from his own statements, traditions, and beliefs that contradict his position on the issue in question. In the debate before us, the Jews deny that their religious tradition allows for *naskh*, and so RD cites from the Torah proof texts, which illustrate how the divinely inspired laws concerning forbidden foods and illicit marriage relations have been changed under the tutelage of the "resolute" (*ūlū' al-'azm*) Prophets Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses.¹⁸ He concludes, "It has thus become clear that the claim of the Jews that '*naskh* has not occurred in our religion or within our community' is false and vain. We have refuted them on the basis of their belief-system and their statements that rules that were operative in the past no longer apply to them; and we have confirmed what we assert in regard to this". [P 113a B; K209a]

Some of RD's examples are surprising; can he not distinguish between a stipulation or exception that is appended to a law at its inception and the abrogation of that law? The Torah prescribes that a Hebrew manservant shall serve for six years and, on the seventh, shall go free. However, the Torah immediately adds a rider: should the servant wish to remain with his master, he may do so, but he must have his ear pierced (See Exodus 21:2–6). Even though this clause is an integral part of the original legislation, RD views the stipulation as *naskh* of the rule that the servant serves for no more than six years.¹⁹

Some alleged abrogations make no sense. The biblical prohibition of cooking a goat in his mother's milk (Exodus 23:19, 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21), which Jewish law expands into a general prohibition on consuming meat and dairy products together, is said to be abrogated by the practice of cooking certain specific sacrifices (*qarābīn mu'ayyana*) in curdled milk (*laban rā'ib*) (P 113bM; K 209b). No source is given for this practice, and I have no idea

where RD heard of it. Might RD or an assistant have misread the unpointed Hebrew text in Leviticus 3:16 as *hālabh* (milk) rather than *hēlabh* (“fat”)? Or perhaps he misunderstood Deuteronomy 32:14 (“Curd of kine . . . with best of lamb”) as a commandment rather than a lyrical theophany? In any case, RD later presents a longer analysis of the same biblical injunction. He asserts that the Hebrew verb *li-bhashēl* is used in two different senses, cooking (*ṭabkh*) and rearing the young (*tarbiyya*). The second of these is the correct choice for the biblical injunction; the Torah instructs not to delay bringing the first-born lamb as an offering by allowing it to grow on its mother’s milk. However, the Jews mistakenly interpreted the verse according to the first sense. Not only that, but they have expanded the prohibition into a blanket ban on consuming dairy and meat products together. Indeed, RD asserts that “they have gone to such an extreme with regard to this issue that they say: were a piece of meat to be thrown upon the end of a cotton cloth that is one hundred cubits long, for example, and a little dairy cast upon the other end, then it would be forbidden to eat this” (P 115b M; K 217a). Here again, I find no trace of such a law or custom, even as an extra-legal restriction practiced by some particular community.

The injunction forbidding one “*li-bhashēl*” the kid in his mother’s milk, has long challenged students of the Bible. However, nearly all of the various interpretations and suggested emendations maintain that *li-bhashēl* means to cook or to boil.²⁰ Modern scholarship also notes the obviously different contexts of the two verses in Exodus (laws pertaining to sacrifices) and the one in Deuteronomy (dietary code).²¹ RD takes no note of the multiple occurrences of the prohibition nor of their different contexts—this despite his earlier remark on the critical role of context in deciding which of several possible meanings to assign to a term.

To the best of my knowledge, only two exegetes assigned to *li-bhashēl* a meaning nearly identical to that chosen by RD: Jacob Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor-Shor of Orléans, a twelfth-century Talmudist, exegete, and poet, and Jacob al-Qirqisānī, an arabophone sectarian who flourished early in the tenth century. The former observed that “rearing” or “fattening” fits the context only for the two occurrences of the verse in Exodus.²² Tabriz, the Ilkhanid capital where RD resided and built huge institutions of learning, attracted visitors from near and afar (Pfeiffer 2013). We know something about European visitors, especially diplomats (Jackson 2005, pp. 137, 165–75, and *passim*). However, none of the known visitors were Jewish, so I can see no route by which Bekhor-Shor’s interpretation could have reached RD. Ostensibly, al-Qirqisānī, who wrote in Arabic, would have been more accessible, but I can say no more than that. A significant number of intellectuals with whom RD was in contact have been identified (Van Ess 1981), but, again, none were Jewish.

RD ends his discussion of the topic (P 115*b M; K 217a)²³ with a caustic rant about the Jews, who themselves have abrogated the laws of the Torah without rhyme or reason. Like the pigheaded man who told his companions that the issues facing them are threefold and then raised four fingers to illustrate the point, the laws and customs of the Jews are irrational and certainly not based on the text of the Torah.

The divine injunctions against fighting the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites are said to have been abrogated by the massacre of the Midianites, which the Israelites carried out in response to the debauchery and punitive plague brought on by the Midianite maidens (Numbers 31:2–11). RD proclaims, “There is no more certain proof than this that *naskh* applies [to the Torah]” (K 210b; P 113b B). The instruction not to be belligerent toward the Moabites and Ammonites (Deuteronomy 2:9, 19) is allegedly abrogated by the prohibition of admitting any one of these people into the congregation of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:4).

RD moves on to some interesting generalizations. The Torah justifies the ban on Moabite or Ammonite proselytes by a historical episode, namely, the refusal of those people to sell food and water to the Israelites. This justification is to be construed as an admission on the part of the Torah that some rules do change in response to changing circumstances. Indeed, the Torah always supplies a historical context for its legislation, which is a *de facto* opening for an abrogation or alteration as circumstances may change. Hence, the claim that the laws of the Torah are eternal is refuted. “On every occasion where that [claim of eternal

application] is applied, specific periods and times are indicated; it [the law in question] is specified on every occasion for one time as opposed to another" (P 114aM; K 211a-b).

Philology also serves to substantiate this point. Consider the laws concerning the Hebrew servant. Should the servant not wish to be manumitted, his ear is pierced, and then he will serve his master "to eternity" (*li-'olam*; Exodus 21:5). However, humans do not live forever, so the Hebrew *li-'olam* must denote a finite period of time. Moreover, RD knows that Jewish tradition has indeed interpreted *li-'olam* as a finite period of time, "until the beginning of the year whose name in the Hebrew language is *yobhel*, which is the fiftieth year . . ." (P 114aM; K 211b). Indeed, adds RD, if the servant had his ear pierced only a year or two before the *yobhel*, then the "eternity" of his servitude is no more than two years.

RD, however, jumps to an incorrect generalization when speaking of the Hebrew term. He states that *li-'olam* not only signifies *adwārukum*, "your generations", but also "it [the Torah] repeats the expression *adwārukum* in all of the places [where *li-'olam* features]. It, thereby, means specific generations, which appertain to them in their statehood (*dawla*)". Were *li-'olam* meant to denote "forever", it would not be qualified by "your generations". RD reminds us here that Moses warned the Jews that "your statehood and your religion will swiftly come to an end".

While the Torah does, at times, use a double expression, e.g., "throughout your generations, as a statute forever (Exodus 12:14)", there are not a few places where it does not. In particular, Deuteronomy 23:7, part of the passage discussed above concerning the status of the Ammonites and Moabites, employs *li-'olam* but does not mention generations. The potential (or actual) use of this phrase for polemical purposes was not lost on Jewish writers. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Foundational Laws of the Torah* 9:1, counts *li-'olam* as one of the phrases cementing the eternity and immutability of the Torah. Seeing as we have that the rejection of *naskh* was the centerpiece of his famous list of normative Jewish beliefs, this is only to be expected. Thus, should someone claim "that those commandments that have been legislated for Israel are not forever and throughout all generations, but rather laws that suit a certain time", we will know to identify that person as a false prophet.

On the other hand, Joseph Albo (1388–1444) argues against Maimonides' position. An entire chapter of his magnum opus, the *Book of Principles*, III, 16, is devoted to this issue.²⁴ Albo cites some of the examples adduced by RD (of whose treatise he could have had no knowledge), but being far more familiar with Jewish sources, he makes a much stronger case. Noting that "someone" has brought proof for the eternity of the Torah from *li-'olam* and similar phrases, he asserts that this position is by no means unassailable. To begin with, unlike RD, Albo knows that not all biblical commandments are qualified in this way, from which one may deduce that only those commandments that are specifically said to be in force *li-'olam* are eternal. Indeed, some commandments, such as the injunction of consuming certain animal fats and blood, which were recorded in the context of the Temple rituals, would seem to lose their force after the destruction of the Temple—hence, the Torah must stipulate for them that they are eternal. This is an insight of the Talmud (Qiddushin 37b), which Albo cites. Albo was deeply involved in religious polemics, but in his case, the opponents were Christian missionaries, and, unlike Maimonides, he was not troubled by potential hints of *naskh* within the Torah.

Let us return to RD. He compares the Hebrew term *'olam* (which he transcribes into Arabic characters as *li-'ulūm*) with its Arabic cognate, *'ālam*, in both the singular and plural forms. Backtracking a bit on his sweeping generalization that *li-'olam* always denotes a finite period of time, he allows for the semantic field of the term to include an endless eternity. In an insightful remark, he states that the meaning of the term can be determined only by its context; in his words, "the intent (*murād*) of this can be understood by means of the context (*bi-l-qarā'in*), what comes before this utterance (*kalām*), and what comes after it" (P 114a B; K 212a). Ultimately, however, RD returns to his original generalization, namely that *'olam* always refers to a finite period of time, which he states more fully and forcefully, "this term . . . does not indicate the true eternity (*'abad*)—not in view of the expression (*lafẓ*), not in view of its signification (*ma'nā*), not in view of its context" (ibid.).²⁵ He reinforces

this view by citing Ecclesiastes 1:4, “One generation passes away, and another generation comes, and the earth remains *li-’olam*”. But the earth will not endure forever, RD observes, and so even here, *li-’olam* does not mean an unending eternity.²⁶

In his long analysis of Deuteronomy 18:15, RD again delves deeply into the Hebrew text. We have already briefly remarked upon his discussion of the meaning of *’ah*, “brother” (P 114b; K 212b–213a). After that lengthy disquisition, he turns his attention to *yaqīm*, “raise up”, which features in the phrase, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet”. However, he seems unaware that the Hebrew phrase is in the *hif’il* conjugation, the transitive form corresponding to the fourth form of Arabic verbs. He consistently writes *yaqūm*—it is vocalized as such in the Paris manuscript—and that is the vocalization, in the first, intransitive form, of both the Hebrew verb and its Arabic cognate. RD’s mistaken transliteration is, thereby, responsible for his claim that the sense of the Hebrew is “will arise unexpectedly (*bughat^{am}*)”. According to him, the employment (in Arabic translation) of *yaqūm* rather than *yazhur* means that the prophet whose coming is foretold will not be one, or perhaps the one, that is “anticipated by you (Israelites), *mutawaqqa’ukum*”. RD has no suggestion what the Hebrew verb corresponding to *yazhur* might have been. The verbs built on the root q.w.m. are fairly synonymous in Hebrew and Arabic, but there is no Hebrew cognate for *yazhur*. Indeed, if one were to allow here the Hebrew *zohēr*, “shine”, then its semantic field might extend to the sense of “sudden appearance” that RD wishes to ascribe to *yaqūm*.

Whose coming did the Israelites anticipate? Another Jew, of course. The verse in Deuteronomy 18:15 is meant to correct this anticipation—the prophet of whose coming Moses is foretelling will not be a Jew.²⁷ At the time, it was well-known that Joshua—a Jew—would be Moses’ immediate successor. Hence, the verse cannot be speaking of Joshua; that would have been superfluous and unnecessary (*’abth*). Moses’ specification that the foretold prophet will be “like me” means that he will be one of the *ūlū al-’azm*, a term applied earlier to the great pre-Mosaic Prophets Adam, Noah, and Abraham. There were many Jewish prophets in Moses’ time, but none measured up to the standard of *ūlū al-’azm*; in particular, none of them established a *sharī’a*. Among the various criteria that were used to determine this special group, RD highlights the establishment of a law among their respective peoples.²⁸ In sum, the prophet whose coming is foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15 is Muḥammad: a descendant of Ishmael, the brother of Isaac, he fits perfectly the description of “your brethren”—a cousin, not a brother—and a lawgiver, *ṣāḥib sharī’a*. Like Moses, he is counted among *ūlū al-’azm*. One last point: Moses is never proclaimed in the Jewish tradition to be “the seal (*khātim*)”, that is the very last of the prophets. Hence, there is no reason that the Jewish tradition cannot allow for an even greater prophet to arise (and seal the phenomenon of prophecy) (Paris 114bB–115aT; K 214b).

RD presses this polemic by citing Deuteronomy 34:10, “Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses . . .”, and his argument is simple. Moses has already foretold the coming of a prophet like him from among his brethren, and now we have a promise that no prophet like Moses will arise in Israel. Ergo, the future prophet who will be like Moses, can only arise from Moses’ brethren—cousins rather than brothers, that is, the descendants of Ishmael. However, one critical grammatical point must first be clarified. The verse employs the perfective mood in Hebrew, *we-lo qam*, and in RD’s Arabic translation, we find *wa-lam yaqum*, which, too, is in the perfective; so how can the phrase signify for a future prophet? RD simply declares (P 115a T), “The expression *lam yaqum* is in the past tense, but its intent is the future time, and there are many examples of this in Arabic”. He cites Qur’an 7:48, which employs the perfective form even though it clearly speaks about a future event to take place on the day of judgment. However, it might have been simpler to cite Sa’adya’s translation, which employs the imperfective or future form, *wa-lā yaqūm ba’dā dhālika*.²⁹ Indeed, the Jewish tradition writ large took the phrase to be in the imperfective mood, that is, an undetermined period of time. The Midrash also saw that the phrase excepted all Jewish prophets and named Bil’am specifically as the prophet who equaled Moses—a remark that medieval exegetes felt that they had to address, even in a

non-polemical context. It is hard to imagine that RD knowingly passed on the opportunity to bolster his interpretation from Jewish sources. Hence, once again, we must conclude that his familiarity with Jewish texts was quite limited.

RD amasses verses from the end of Deuteronomy (e.g., 4:25–27), which speak of the imminent and complete destruction of the Jewish people. Though he does not say this explicitly, it seems as if he is extending the meaning of *naskh* to include the abrogation or annulment of the Jewish people and not only their laws. Indeed, it is clear from his presentation that RD considers a valid law code to be the prerogative of a sovereign people, and the Jews have not enjoyed that status since the destruction of the Temple. RD returns to a favorite theme: the abandonment of certain practices by Jews, not on account of a later revelation, but rather due to the destruction of the Temple, whose full functioning is needed for their implementation. The fact that on their own, without divine direction, the Jews had to abandon those practices is “the greatest and most powerful proof for *naskh*” (K 217b). Examples are animal sacrifices and the trial of the unfaithful spouse described in Leviticus 11. There can be no argument that both are mandated by the Torah and neither is in force, nor have they been for many centuries. The laws were abrogated along with the destruction of the Temple, and the Temple was destroyed as part of the ruin of Jewish sovereignty.

Still, here again, RD’s account is marred by fanciful, unhistorical details. Assuming, as I do, that he is not simply making all of this up, one can only wonder where or how he heard of these details. For example, he observes that when the Temple was functioning, fire descended from heaven and completely consumed the animal, bones and all. But now (*al-’ān*; but when?), were someone to slaughter many sheep and pile upon them a lot of sulfur, they would not burn at all. Though Jewish tradition does occasionally speak of fire descending from heaven, the Torah explicitly instructs the priests to place the fire on the altar (Leviticus 1:7); the Talmud elaborates upon this further (Yoma 21b).

We encounter a similar mix of fact and misunderstanding, along with an intriguing account of different practices among the Jews, in RD’s polemic concerning the ashes of the red heifer used in some biblical purification rituals (K 281a–b, Paris 115baT; see Numbers 17). A priest sprinkles a liquid containing the ashes upon the defiled person on the third and seventh day of a seven-day quarantine. While these laws are certainly no longer in practice, they too—pace RD—are connected to the Temple, since only a person desiring to enter the Temple compound must undergo them. RD adds that most Jews have abandoned the week-long quarantine as well, though some still observe it, even though the full purification ritual is impossible. This report warrants further investigation.

RD cites a maxim of the Jewish sages, which states that purity and impurity are irrelevant while the Jews are in exile, adding that the Jews are foolish not to realize that this rule confirms *naskh*. Interestingly enough, the post-exilic status of the laws of purity seems to have been mainly a concern of Karaite Jews.³⁰ Clearly, for RD, *naskh* is far more than a tool used when a new revelation supersedes an earlier one; it refers to the annulment of Jewish law or custom by historical circumstances as well. God’s timeless knowledge that Jewish sovereignty and the Temple, including necessarily all laws that depend upon those institutions, will be lost at some point in earthly time necessarily entails *naskh* of critical features of Judaism within the divine master plan, so to speak.

RD lists, one after the other, the many biblical laws, from holidays to purification rituals that require an animal sacrifice, accusing the Jews of abrogating each one. Additionally, by deleting these practices, they have abrogated the general biblical directive not to add or subtract from any of the laws given in the Torah (Deuteronomy 13:1), a point that applies even while the Temple is standing. RD cites the commandment to change the Temple shewbread on each Sabbath (Leviticus 24:8) as an abrogation of the injunction not to perform any labor on that holy day.

Historical episodes are cited as evidence of abrogations of Mosaic law by later prophets. Their contents, when contradicting something of the Torah, are to be considered *naskh*: “Even though those [later prophetic] books do not contain a new law, the Jews believe

in them exactly as firmly as they believe in the Torah of Moses, proclaiming that they are all books of God Most High (P 115*bM; K 220a)³¹. For example, Joshua's pact with the Gibeonites abrogated the biblical commandment not to make any treaties with the inhabitants of Canaan.³² RD includes a lengthy exposition of the misdeeds of the Jews and their disregard for their own prophets, notably Jeremiah; several verses are cited, not all of which can be readily identified, and his description of the Temple and some of its rites differs significantly from traditional Jewish accounts. For our purposes, the key takeaway is that *naskh*, the abrogation of scripture, is intimately bound with the nullification of the Jewish religion *tout court*: the same polemic serves to establish *naskh kutubihim wa-'ibtāl dīnīhum*.

The final section of the essay concerns what RD calls "future abrogation", his term for the far-reaching changes that Christians have made to Jewish law and custom. Repeating an assertion made earlier on, RD notes that Nestorians and Jacobites are really Jews; hence, the many arguments made for *naskh* apply to them as well.³³ As for the changes introduced into Jewish practice by the generality of Christians, which are designated *taghyīr* ("alteration") and *tabdīl* ("substitution"), they amount to *naskh* in deed if not in name.

Two passages from the Gospels are cited at length in order to illustrate Jesus' role in breaching Mosaic legislation, namely, the "Sermon on the Mount" (especially Mark 5:38) and the story of "Jesus in the grain fields" (Matthew 12). RD then discusses five reversals of the Torah that were implemented by the Apostles: (1) making Sunday the Sabbath rather than Saturday; (2) allowing the consumption of pig's flesh; (3) allowing marriage to some degrees of kin that are forbidden in Judaism; (4) outlawing polygamy; and (5) the story of Jesus and Zechariah as related in the first book of Luke. It is not clear what RD wishes to derive from the last of these, as there is a lacuna in both manuscripts. Even more intriguing is the marginal note at the top of K 224a that the lacuna (*al-biyāḍ*) is found in "both copies". One might expect that all versions of the Arabic *rasā'il* derive from P, but what is the second manuscript consulted by the copyist of K? Could it be the Persian original?³⁴

We have reached the end of the treatise; RD states his conclusion, "These are the verses sent down in the Torah and the Gospels that contain the abrogation of the laws of the Torah and religion of the Jews. From this, one learns clearly and decisively that ever since the creation of Adam, peace be upon him, until the time of Moses, peace be upon him, and from the time of Moses until the end of the epoch of Jesus, peace be upon him, *naskh* befell the laws. After that date, God, praised and exalted, sent the chosen one, Muḥammad, the seal of the prophets, to all of humanity. . . (P 117bM; K 224a)". The final lines cite some Qur'anic verses as well as one hadith in support of this claim.

2. Conclusions

In the field of religious polemics, *naskh*, "abrogation", is best known as the claim that an earlier divine revelation—the laws recorded in the Hebrew Bible in particular—has been abrogated by a later disclosure, namely, the Qur'an. However, the compass of the concept is much wider. In Qur'anic hermeneutics, contradictions between two verses are, at times, explained by the one having abrogated the other. Surprisingly, Jewish opposition to this particular device is registered in the Islamic literature, with no hint of a polemical context. Moreover, even after having converted to Islam, some former Jews or Christians continued to reject *naskh* as an interpretative tool.

The reach of *naskh* was greatly extended in the essay of RD. Indeed, he hardly refers to Qur'anic legislation at all, harping instead on themes within the Jewish tradition and the contradictions and abrogations that he detects within. RD makes much of the cancellation of practices sanctioned by the Torah even in the absence of any contradictory revelation (at times marking this by a different term, *butlān*). Moreover, he insists upon a close binding of the normative status of Jewish law and custom with Jewish political independence. The termination of the latter, accompanied by the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of Jews, serve for him as strong a proof as any that the Law of the Torah, the Jewish *sharī'a*, is no longer in force. The level of RD's command of Jewish texts and practice cannot yet be

determined, nor can any specific sources be identified beyond the Bible and Talmud. Some of RD's accounts resonate with Karaite traditions.

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Notes

- ¹ I lay out my arguments in a forthcoming entry in the Oxford Handbook of Jewish Philosophy.
- ² For the full text see (Ibn Janāḥ 1886, p. 46 ll. 4–7).
- ³ Translations from the Qur'an are taken from (Nasr et al. 2015), here pp. 49–50, with rich notes.
- ⁴ Here too the literature is quite extensive; I have in my digital vaults many unpublished manuscripts on the topic. A thorough and authoritative discussion from the perspective of traditional Qur'an studies can be found in Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, available in English in (Al-Suyūṭī 2011, pp. 112–29).
- ⁵ Similar traditions are cited by al-Wāḥidī, al-Biqā'ī, and other commentators; all of their glosses are easily accessible online, keyed to the Qur'anic verse, and in Arabic, at <https://www.atafsir.com/>, accessed on 12 February 2024; a small selection can be found in English translation as well.
- ⁶ For the full text see (Al-Suyūṭī 2011, p. 112).
- ⁷ (Krawulsky 2011, p. 78). At times it can be a bit confusing when the writer of the appendix speaks in the first person. The author states that he will collect those verses from the Torah and the Gospels that serve his purpose and translate them into both Arabic and Persian so as to reach the widest possible audience. In the Arabic versions which I studied, the Hebrew and Syriac verses are transcribed into Arabic characters, followed by an Arabic translation. Presumably, then, RD, planned from the outset to issue this piece in at least in two languages. Again, presumably, the Hebrew was translated into Persian by RD, or some unnamed individual literate in Hebrew, and then rendered into Arabic by al-Ḥusaynī. However, we know next to nothing about RD's education in Jewish texts; indeed, his Jewish origin is still contested by some (Netzer 1994). The Arabic translations are not those of Sa'adya (in one case I checked as well a Karaite translation). Indeed, there were many Arabic translations available, mostly prepared by Jews and Christians; see (Griffith 2013; Vollandt 2018).
- ⁸ (Van Ess 1981, p. 14). On an issue with the modern pagination, see below, note 34.
- ⁹ The Arabic and Persian manuscripts are listed by (Krawulsky 2011, pp. 84–85). The Paris manuscript is available for free download at this site: <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b52510223k.r=arabe%202324?rk=21459;2>>, accessed on 12 February 2024. The opening page in MS Istanbul, Kılıç Ali Pasha displays ٥٣٨ crossed out, and beneath it ٤٥٨; in the stamp of the Suleymaniye Library, we find 835/854. Van Ess 1981 is a short and rich monograph on the *rasā'il* which focuses upon the circle of scholars whom RD invited to review his essays. Very few of the *rasā'il* have been studied or edited: some recent publications are (Klein-Franke 2002, 2007; Fayazi 2012).
- ¹⁰ (Madigan 2013, p. 87). Indeed, there are not a few passages in the Qur'an and elsewhere that indicate that Muhammad was sent to to confirm the Torah; see (Adang 1996, pp. 5, 197, and *passim*).
- ¹¹ See (Adang 1996, p. 264), for a tabular presentation of the citations of the verse, which is frequently cited by Muslim polemicists. Compare also (Halkin and Hartman 1993, p. xvii, n. 131), for important references to Muslim polemicists who cite Genesis 17:20 but make no argument from *gematria*.
- ¹² (Halkin and Hartman 1993, p. 107). Maimonides' remark that Muslims do not consider this to be a valid argument bears comparison with a remark made in the same treatise but in a different context. Maimonides describes the forced recital of the *shahāda* as a pastiche: the Muslim authorities know that the Jew is not reciting it sincerely, yet they accept it and thereby spare the life of the Jew. The overall impression—one which I do not think truly represents Maimonides' full and considered position—is that Muslims do not take seriously their own religion, or at least the component of violently compelled conversions.
- ¹³ English translation available in (Perlmann 1964, on pp. 46–47).
- ¹⁴ (Mingana 1922, pp. 85–86). The verse from Deut. 18:18, which relays the divine response to Moses' prayer in 18:15, and stipulates as well that the foretold prophet will be a brother to and like Moses, is cited by Ibn Qutayba, who makes the same argument as does RD: the verse must be speaking of a cousin, rather than a brother, hence a descendant of Ishmael. The relevant passage may be found in (Adang 1996, p. 267). See further (Adang 1996, p. 269, and more generally, Frank 2004).
- ¹⁵ For the full text see (Ibn Janāḥ 1896, pp. 20–21).
- ¹⁶ See (Blau 2006, p. 771), left column; (Zucker 1984, p. 250) (Arabic) p. 334 (Hebrew) and the very long note 250 to the Hebrew translation; (Ratzaby 1998, p. 376).
- ¹⁷ For the full text see (Nasr et al. 2015, p. 155).

- 18 The phrase *ūlū' al-'azm* features in Qur'an 46:35, designating an elite group that are marked off from all other prophets. Their particular distinction is clarified in Qur'an 2:253: they are legislative prophets, and as the polemic concerns mainly the abrogation of legislation, the term appears more than once in the course of RD's essay. See (Nasr et al. 2015, pp. 109 and 1296); the term will be treated in more detail below, page 17.
- 19 Burton (2001) discusses a very wide range of meanings given to *naskh* in Islamic jurisprudence, but I do not find any mention there of a rider being considered as *naskh*.
- 20 See the thorough survey of (Schorch 2010).
- 21 (Fishbane 1985, pp. 229–30), speaks of the “de-sacralization” of the prohibition in Deuteronomy.
- 22 Please look carefully at Cooper (Cooper 2012, especially p. 126).
- 23 The modern pagination in the upper left corner of P has inadvertently numbered each of two consecutive folia 115, but numbered fol. 117 correctly, so the folios are numbered here 115, 115*, 117, in that order; I refer to the one should have been labeled 116 by 115*.
- 24 On Albo and his polemics see (Lasker 1980, 2019).
- 25 Concerning the first two terms see (Germann 2011). Briefly, *lafz* refers to the lexical listings for the term, whereas *ma'nā* encompasses a wider range of meanings which the term can take on.
- 26 Cf. Sa'adya, who takes this linking as evidence that the Torah will not be abrogated (Adang 1996, pp. 198–99). The question, whether the universe will perdure forever or vanish at the end of days, was debated in the medieval period, but the point is moot with regard to the issue at hand. If the Torah will vanish along with heavens and earth at the *eskhatos*, then there is no reason now for Jews to accept Islam. As long as humanity exists, the Torah will be valid.
- 27 Note that the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Batra 15b) remarks that before Moses there were non-Jewish prophets, but in response to Moses' prayer all prophets after Moses were Jews.
- 28 The phrase occurs in Qur'an 46:35. On this special group of prophets see (Rubin 2004, p. 236), who translates the phrase “those endowed with constancy”. The different interpretations of the phrase are concisely presented in Rubin's paper.
- 29 The Karaite exegete Japhet ben Ali presents a long disquisition on the phrase and reaches the same conclusion: despite the morphology which indicates the past, the sense of the expression refers clearly to the future; see (Frank 2004, p. 244).
- 30 The topic receives some attention in Hallevi's *Cuzari* III, 49. Much more explicit statements in line with Rashīd al-Dīn's account are found in Karaite writings. Anan ben David is reported to have maintained that laws concerning the impurity incurred by contact with a corpse are not in force during the exile specifically because there are no more ashes of the heifer; see the text cited in (Poznanski 1902, p. 197 n. 6). Additional sources are cited by (Zucker 1959, note 606 on pp. 1501–151), and more information is added by (Gil 2004, pp. 246–47, 266–67).
- 31 See note 23 above; for those consulting the freely available pdf of P, the page in question is 237.
- 32 See chapter nine in the book of Joshua. The prohibition of concluding a treaty with the inhabitant of Canaan is found in Exodus 23:32.
- 33 RD was probably relying on testimonies of the Nestorians that they are descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes, a tradition that was staunchly maintained even in the early nineteenth century, reported (and believed) by (Grant 1841). The Jacobites polemicized against Judaism and branded Jews as *Ḥanpē* (Pagans); see (Teule 2001).
- 34 Earlier on (K 221a; P 115*b,M) RD cites Arabic versions of Hebrew prophecies that I cannot identify; the Lord warns that he will erase Jerusalem like locusts clean the surface of the earth, and then four nations will attack. A marginal note in K begins, “In the Persian this was . . .”. Apparently the copyist was also befuddled; might he have consulted the Persian version for assistance?

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