

A Study of Scripture

Can God's Word Change?

Naskh (Abrogation) in the
Qur'an and the Bible

Steven Masood

Can God's Word Change
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To both Muslims and Christians

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Preface

Why This Study Matters

This study grew out of years of reading, reflection, and conversation. As a Muslim student of Islamic studies, and later as a believer in Jesus the Messiah, I kept returning to questions about revelation, Scripture, and the enduring integrity of God’s word. In many discussions with Muslim friends about the Bible, one issue surfaced again and again: the doctrine of *naskh*, commonly translated as “abrogation.”

Those conversations often reached the same point. Questions about the Bible’s reliability would lead to a familiar claim: later revelation replaced earlier revelation. Over time, that repeated appeal forced me to ask whether this conclusion arises clearly from the Qur’an itself or from a later interpretive tradition within Islamic thought.

That question became more pressing as I realized that *naskh* is not merely a technical topic for specialists. It bears directly on how the Qur’an is interpreted, how Islamic law developed, and how Muslims and Christians

understand the continuity of divine revelation. It also shapes the way the Bible is discussed, defended, or dismissed in interfaith conversation.

This book, therefore, examines the doctrine of *naskh*, traces its historical development, considers how it has been applied, and asks what larger questions it raises about the nature of Scripture. My central concern is straightforward: whether *naskh* is best understood as a necessary teaching of the Qur'an or as a later framework developed to explain interpretive and legal tensions.

If this study helps readers think more carefully, read more closely, and engage one another more honestly about revelation and Scripture, it will have served its purpose.

Introduction

Can God's Word Change?

Understanding *Naskh* and the Integrity of Scripture

Both the Bible and the Qur'an speak with striking force about the enduring integrity of God's word. The Bible declares, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8), a truth echoed in the New Testament: "the word of the Lord endures forever" (1 Peter 1:25). The Qur'an likewise affirms that God's words cannot be changed (Sura 6:34; 10:64; 48:23). This shared conviction forms the starting point of this study and sharpens its central question: how should claims about *naskh* be understood in light of the enduring word of God?

Scripture in History

If God's word is enduring and trustworthy, that conviction must be considered within history. Revelation is received, preserved, transmitted, and interpreted within communities, and those historical realities inevitably raise questions about continuity, authority, and application.

Neither the Bible nor the Qur'an was first given as a bound volume. Both have histories of transmission, collection, and recognition within communities of faith. In both traditions, believers have had to wrestle with questions arising from transmission, interpretation, and differing reports. These realities do not by themselves imply weakness; they show that divine revelation was received and understood in real human settings.

In the case of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, the biblical writings were composed over many centuries, copied across generations, and preserved by communities that regarded them as sacred. Although textual variations and historical questions have long been discussed, the Scriptures as a whole bear a coherent witness to God, His holiness, His dealings with humanity, and His redemptive purpose. For this reason, Christians have understood the integrity of Scripture not

merely in terms of isolated manuscript details, but in the enduring continuity of its message.

The Qur'an also has a well-known history of collection within Islamic tradition. According to that tradition, revelations were recited, memorized, and written on various materials during Muhammad's lifetime, and after his death, the early caliphs gathered and standardized the text for the growing Muslim community. At the same time, Islamic sources also preserve reports of remembered passages, variant recitations, and material no longer recited in later practice. Classical Muslim scholars did not ignore these reports; they sought to explain them.

The Emergence of *Naskh*

It is in this context that the doctrine of *naskh* became important. In its simplest sense, *naskh* refers to the replacement or supersession of one revelation or ruling by another. Qur'anic passages such as Sura 2:106, 16:101, and 22:52 have often been cited in support of this idea. Over time, Muslim exegetes and jurists developed the doctrine of *al-nāsikh wa al-mansūkh*—the abrogating and the abrogated—to explain differences in the Qur'anic text,

developments in legal rulings, and the relationship between earlier and later revelation.

Why This Matters

This matters because *naskh* is often asked to do substantial explanatory work. It is invoked to address apparent tensions within the Qur'an, to account for changes in legal rulings, and, in some interpretations, to argue that earlier Scriptures such as the Torah and the Gospel have been superseded. For that reason, the doctrine has implications not only for Islamic thought but also for Christian-Muslim discussion about the nature of revelation.

These are not merely technical questions for specialists. They shape how believers understand Scripture, authority, and the continuity of God's guidance.

A Diversity of Views

One of the most important facts about this subject is that Muslim scholars have not understood *naskh* in a single, uniform way. Some affirmed it broadly, others limited its scope, and still others reinterpreted or questioned many of its classic examples.

That diversity matters because it suggests that *naskh* is not a self-evident or universally agreed doctrine, but a concept shaped through interpretation, debate, and attempts to make sense of the sources.

The Question Before Us

This study, therefore, asks a central question: Does the Qur'an itself teach a doctrine of replacement, or is that doctrine a later interpretive development? Related questions follow: How did *naskh* emerge, how has it been applied, and what role has it played in shaping the understanding of revelation?

A further question arises from this inquiry. Is divine revelation better understood as replacement or as fulfillment? In the biblical framework, later revelation does not cancel what came before; it fulfills and completes it. The New Testament presents Jesus not as setting aside earlier revelation but as bringing it to completion. The contrast between replacement and fulfillment is therefore not merely verbal; it reflects two distinct ways of understanding how God speaks and acts in history.

The chapters that follow examine the meaning of *naskh*, its historical development, the Qur'anic passages most often associated with it, its role in Islamic

interpretation, and the questions it raises for the doctrine of Scripture. The aim is not to force a quick verdict, but to ask whether *naskh* genuinely reflects the unchangeable word of God or whether it functions as a later interpretive response to textual and legal tensions.

The question is simple to ask but far-reaching in its implications: Can God's word change?

Structure of This Study

This study is organized to move from definition to application and then from application to theological reflection.

The opening section defines *naskh*, traces its development, and explains its classification within Islamic thought. This provides the conceptual foundation for what follows.

The discussion then turns to the doctrine's practical application through specific examples and the interpretive challenges they present.

From there, the study examines classical and modern approaches, showing how scholars across periods have defended, limited, or reassessed the concept.

Introduction.

The argument then broadens to one of the most important questions raised by the doctrine: whether the Qur'an should be understood as abrogating earlier Scriptures, such as the Torah and the Gospel.

The final chapters examine how these issues appear in contemporary discussion and how they may be addressed thoughtfully in real conversations about whether the Qur'an affirms earlier Scriptures, calls Jews and Christians to follow them, and why believers in Jesus as the Messiah believe that their Scripture is not replaced by the Qur'an.

The study concludes with a final reflection on Scripture, interpretation, and the nature of divine revelation. Throughout, the aim is not only to inform but also to invite careful thought and meaningful dialogue about the integrity of what we hold as Scripture.

PART I

Understanding the Concept of *Naskh*

This opening section introduces the concept of *naskh* (abrogation) and examines its place in Islamic thought. It begins by exploring the term's meaning and linguistic background, then traces its gradual development into a formal doctrine, and finally considers how Muslim scholars classified its various forms. Together, these chapters lay the foundation for the discussions that follow.

- Chapter 1 – What Is *Naskh*?
- Chapter 2 – Development of the Doctrine
- Chapter 3 – Types of *Naskh*

Chapter 1

What Is “*Naskh*”?

The first challenge in discussing *naskh* is that the term itself is not self-defining. Early Muslim scholars recognized that it could be used in more than one sense and that its meaning shifted with context. For that reason, definitions of *naskh* vary across the Islamic tradition, and any careful study must begin by clarifying what the word is being asked to mean.

A Word with Many Meanings

In ordinary Arabic usage, *naskh* can mean removing something, replacing one thing with another, transferring it elsewhere, or copying a text. That range matters because later scholars did not all select the same sense when interpreting Qur’anic passages. As a result, disagreement about doctrine begins at the level of language itself.

From Language to Doctrine

Over time, Muslim jurists and exegetes gave the term a more technical meaning. In legal theory and Qur'anic interpretation, *naskh* came to refer to the replacement, suspension, or ending of an earlier ruling by a later revelation.¹ This definition reflects the wider claim that divine guidance was disclosed progressively and that later instruction could alter earlier practice.

Even within this narrower usage, agreement was limited. Some scholars stressed replacement (*tabdīl*), others removal (*izāla* or *rafʿ*), and others allowed for cancellation without direct replacement.

This variation is significant. It suggests that *naskh* is not a single, sharply bounded concept, but a cluster of related interpretive moves. In some cases, it refers to replacement; in others, to limitation, clarification, or suspension. For that reason, discussions of abrogation often depend as much on the interpreter's framework as on the text under discussion.

¹ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 150.

Early Attempts to Define *Naskh*

Early Muslim scholars offered notably different definitions of *naskh*. The lexicographer al-Khalil (d. 786)² described it as the removal of one command and its replacement by another. Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) distinguished between complete removal and replacement with something new.³ Al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820), however, understood *naskh* as the suspension of a ruling rather than its total rejection.⁴

These differences show that even major authorities did not speak with a single voice. The doctrine was being formed through debate, not simply received in finished form.

A Practical Illustration

A commonly cited example shows how the doctrine was applied in practice. The waiting period (*'idda*) for a widow appears in two Qur'anic passages. One gives a duration of one year (Sura 2:240), while the other gives four months and ten days (Sura 2:234).

² Tusi, *Tibyan*, vol. 1, 393; Burton, *The Sources of Islamic Law*, 91.

³ Abu Abdullah, Muhammad Ibn Hazm, *Ma'rifa al-Nasikh wa al-Mansukh*, 3; Burton, *The Sources of Islamic Law*, 97.

⁴ Al-Shafi, *Risala*, 106; Majid Khadduri, *al-Shafi's Risala: Treatise on the Foundation of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 124-128.

Both verses remain in the Qur'an. Most scholars understood the latter ruling to supersede the earlier one, while the earlier verse continued to be recited but was no longer applied in law.⁵ This became one of the standard illustrations of abrogation in which the wording remains, but the legal effect changes.

Why Was *Naskh* Needed?

As Muslim scholars studied the Qur'an and related traditions, they encountered passages that seemed difficult to harmonize. Some verses stress patience and non-coercion (Sura 2:256), while others speak in the language of confrontation and struggle (Sura 9:5). Some passages sound open toward Jews and Christians (Sura 2:62), while others emphasize the finality and exclusivity of Islam (Sura 3:85).

Many scholars did not treat these differences as contradictions. Instead, they invoked *naskh* to explain how later revelation could clarify, modify, or replace earlier guidance. That move was interpretively powerful, but it also raised a deeper question: do these passages reflect stages of guidance, or do they reveal tensions that later scholarship sought to manage?

⁵ John Burton, *The Sources of Islamic Law*, 98.

The Growing Importance of *Naskh*

By the second and third centuries of Islam, *naskh* had become an established feature of Qur'anic interpretation and legal theory. Some scholars treated knowledge of abrogation as essential to responsible exegesis. A well-known early report even warns that interpreting the Qur'an without understanding abrogation risks serious error.⁶

Whether or not such reports can be historically verified in every detail, they show how central the doctrine became in classical Islamic thought.⁷

A Question Worth Asking

At this point, a natural question arises: if God's word is perfect, why would one revelation need to replace another?

Muslim scholars answered that question in different ways. Some argued that changing circumstances required fresh guidance, that law was given gradually, or that later rulings expressed divine wisdom more fully.

⁶ Ibn Salam, *al-Nasikh wa al-Mansukh*, 3; For similar versions see Nahhas, *al-Nasikh wa al-Mansukh*, 5; Zarkashi, *al-Burhan fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, vol. 2, 29; Andrew Rippin, *al-Zuhri, Naskh al-Qur'an and the problem of early tafsir texts*, 28.

⁷ John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an*, 239.

Others stressed that the process reflects divine purpose rather than inconsistency. Even so, those answers do not end the discussion; they open further questions about the nature of revelation and continuity.

No Clear List

A striking feature of the doctrine is that the Qur'an itself does not provide a list of abrogated verses. Scholars, therefore, had to identify such verses through interpretation, chronology, and later reports. Different lists emerged, but no universally accepted list ever gained traction. That lack of agreement remains one of the doctrine's central difficulties.

Conclusion

At this stage, one point is already clear: *naskh* is neither simple nor uniformly defined. The term carries multiple meanings, and Muslim scholars have long differed on how it should be understood and applied. Although many accepted it as a way to explain differences within the Qur'an, they did not agree on its precise nature, limits, or scope.

This raises a broader question. If divine revelation is perfect and consistent, how should apparent differences within it be interpreted? Does *naskh*

adequately explain those differences, or does it point to deeper interpretive problems?

The absence of a universally accepted list of abrogated verses underscores that complexity. What one scholar identifies as abrogation, another may explain through context, qualification, or reconciliation. In practice, the identification of *mansūkh* (abrogated) passages often depends less on explicit textual guidance than on interpretive judgment.

The next step, then, is not only to ask what *naskh* means but how it became so influential in Islamic thought. Tracing its historical development may help us see more clearly whether it arises directly from the Qur'an or from later efforts to interpret it.

Chapter 2

From Simple Idea to Formal Theory

How the Doctrine of *Naskh* Developed

In the earliest period of Islam, the concept of *naskh* appears to have been relatively straightforward. Early Muslims recognized that certain directives were conditioned by particular circumstances, that later instructions could differ from earlier ones, and that some earlier practices had ceased to be observed. At this stage, however, no fully developed theory of abrogation had yet emerged.

The concept thus existed in practice, but it had not yet been clearly defined, systematically organized, or formally articulated.

The Need for Explanation

As Islam expanded and scholars examined the Qur'an more closely, they encountered increasing challenges in interpreting certain passages. Some addressed similar

issues in different ways, reflecting changing circumstances, while reports in the traditions (*hadith*) could also differ, and early legal rulings were not always entirely consistent.

In response to these questions, scholars sought a framework that would preserve both the unity and authority of revelation while accounting for such variation. The doctrine of *naskh* gradually emerged as one such interpretive solution.

Qur'anic Foundations and Interpretation

The doctrine of *naskh* is closely associated with certain Qur'anic passages, often interpreted as supporting the idea of abrogation. The most frequently cited passage is:

“None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We bring one better than it or similar to it” (Sura 2:106).

Other passages have also been linked to this concept:

“Allah will cancel what Satan throws in, then Allah will confirm His signs” (Sura 22:52).

“When We substitute one revelation for another...” (Sura 16:101).

“Allah blots out or confirms what He wills” (Sura 13:39)

In these and similar passages, various Arabic terms associated with *replacing*, *substituting*, *forgetting*, or *erasing* appear.⁸ Many scholars have interpreted these expressions as indicating the possibility of change, replacement, or removal within the process of revelation.

At the same time, these passages have not been interpreted uniformly. Scholars have differed significantly in their understanding of key expressions, especially *mā nansakh* in Sura 2:106. Some interpret it to mean “whatever verse We withdraw,” others “whatever verse We replace,” and still others understand it as referring to changes in application rather than to the text itself. In some cases, interpreters have introduced additional terms, such as *ḥukm* (ruling), in order to clarify the sense of the passage.

The Historical Setting

The development of *naskh* is closely tied to the evolving circumstances of Muhammad’s ministry.

⁸ Terms such as *nansakh* (We abrogate), *baddala* (to substitute), *nunsi* (to cause to be forgotten), and *maḥā* (to erase) appear.

Can God's Word Change?

In the early Meccan period, the message was primarily one of warning and moral exhortation, urging people to repent and be accountable to God (cf. Sura 87:9). These revelations emphasized:

- the oneness of God
- the coming judgment
- and the example of earlier biblical prophets

During the Meccan period, the tone of the revelations was largely marked by patience and endurance in the face of opposition. A well-known expression of this posture appears in the words: "To you be your religion, and to me mine" (Sura 109:6).

After the migration (*hijra*) to Medina, however, circumstances changed, and with them the needs of the emerging Muslim community. Muhammad came to function not only as a preacher but also as the leader of a developing social and political order. The revelations from this period, therefore, reflect new responsibilities, including communal organization, legal regulation, and conflict resolution.

In this new setting, the Qur'an presents Muhammad in a broader role: as one to be obeyed

alongside God (Sura 4:80), as a model for the community (Sura 33:21), and as a guide for an emerging social order.

With this shift came corresponding developments in the content and emphasis of revelation. The growing community required forms of guidance appropriate to its changing circumstances, including legal instruction, social regulation, and guidance on conflict and governance.

As a result, some earlier practices were revised. Among the most frequently cited examples are the shift in the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca, changes in fasting practices, and the introduction of new legal rulings (Sura 2:144, 183-185).

In the same way, the tone of certain passages reflects differing historical contexts. Whereas earlier revelations emphasize patience and endurance, later passages address confrontation within the setting of communal conflict.

Rather than viewing these developments as contradictions, many scholars understood them as successive stages in an ongoing process of divine guidance.

From Context to Interpretation

These developments created a situation in which various passages appeared to reflect different stages of instruction. Classical Muslim scholars generally did not view this as an inconsistency but as an expression of divine wisdom unfolding over time.

Within this framework, the doctrine of *naskh* emerged as a means of explaining how these stages relate to one another. This transition from observed change to a structured explanation marks a key step in the doctrine's formation.

The Role of Early Scholars

From the second century of Islam onward, scholars of law (*fuqahā'*) and of interpretation (*mufassirūn*) increasingly focused on abrogation.

Figures such as Mālik ibn Anas (d. 795) and al-Zuhrī (d. 741) show early engagement with the concept, even if they did not articulate a fully developed theory.

Early Muslim scholars considered knowledge of the abrogating (*nāsikh*) and abrogated (*mansūkh*) verses essential to the proper interpretation of the Qur'an. Some

even warned that those unfamiliar with the doctrine could fall into serious error in religious matters.⁹

This reflects the growing importance of *naskh* in early Islamic scholarship.

The Move Toward Systematization

By the third century of Islam, scholars moved beyond merely recognizing the phenomenon to developing a structured doctrine. This entailed identifying examples, establishing principles, and organizing categories.

As a result, *naskh* became an established method within Qur'anic interpretation and Islamic legal theory.

Al-Shāfi'ī and a Turning Point

A major turning point came with al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820). In *al-Risāla*, he wrote: "Nothing abrogates the Book of God except the Book of God... Nor does the Sunna abrogate except the Sunna."¹⁰

For al-Shāfi'ī, abrogation was a divine act, not a human one. Only God could replace one ruling with

⁹ al-Naḥḥās, Abū Ja'far, *Kitāb al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, 5; Andrew Rippin, "al-Zuhrī, Naskh al-Qur'ān and the Problem of Early Tafsīr Texts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 47 (1984): 22–23.

¹⁰ al-Shāfi'ī, *Risāla*, 54; Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 213

another. Human beings could only recognize and interpret it.

He also connected *naskh* with the idea of clarification (*bayān*), stating: "Abrogation is a clarification of the end of a ruling."¹¹

Not all scholars agreed with this interpretation. Some argued instead that *naskh* involves the termination (*raf' al-ḥukm*) of a ruling rather than its clarification.¹²

The Emergence of Different Schools

As Islamic scholarship developed, different legal schools (*madhāhib*) approached *naskh* in distinct ways. Debates arose over questions such as:

- Can the Sunna abrogate the Qur'an?
- Can the Qur'an abrogate the Sunna?
- Is abrogation partial or complete?

If this is the case, an important question arises: is *naskh* a teaching clearly found in the Qur'an, or is it a doctrine developed later in order to interpret it?

¹¹ al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risāla*, 146.

¹²Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 152; al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā*, vol. 1:83.

These debates demonstrate that there was no single, universally accepted theory of *naskh*, but rather a range of interpretations shaped by legal and theological concerns.¹³

The Problem of Chronology

A central issue in applying *naskh* is determining chronological order—which revelation came first and which came later. In principle, the later revelation is understood to supersede the earlier one.

In practice, however, this determination is often difficult. The Qur'an is not arranged chronologically, reports vary, and the dating of specific passages is frequently uncertain.¹⁴

To address this difficulty, scholars relied on transmitted reports and developed the principle that abrogation is established through chronology. Yet the reliability of such reports has itself remained a matter of scholarly discussion.¹⁵

¹³Abū Sulaymān, *The Islamic Theory of International Relations*, 84.

¹⁴Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories*, 70ff.

¹⁵Ali Ibn al-Wahidi, *Asbab al-Nuzul* (tr. Mokrane Guezzou), Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, Amman: 2008; Andrew Rippin, *The Function of Asbab al-Nuzul in Qur'anic Exegesis* (2018, The Institute of Ismaili Studies); Rippin, Andrew. 'The exegetical genre *asbab al-nuzul*: a

From Historical Process to Legal Doctrine

It appears that *naskh* may originally have functioned as a way of describing a historical process—that is, the manner in which revelation addressed changing circumstances. Over time, however, it developed into a formal legal and theological doctrine.

Some modern scholars have suggested that what began as a practical explanation was subsequently transformed into a more general interpretive method.¹⁶ This raises important questions about how the doctrine should be understood.

A Question for Reflection

At this stage, an important question emerges: was *naskh* originally a practical explanation, or was it intended from the outset as a formal doctrine?

The evidence suggests that it developed gradually, moving from observed practice to structured theory. This gradual development invites reflection on how much of the doctrine derives from revelation itself and how much from scholars' interpretive efforts.

bibliographical and terminological survey, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (BSOAS), XLVIII, 1, 1985, 1 15.

¹⁶ John Burton, *The Sources of Islamic Law* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 21–30.

Conclusion

The development of *naskh* from a practical observation into a formal doctrine reveals an important dimension of Islamic intellectual history. What began as an attempt to account for changes in guidance over time gradually evolved into a structured method within legal and exegetical thought.

At the same time, this development raises significant questions. If *naskh* emerged in response to interpretive challenges, to what extent does it reflect the Qur'an itself, and to what extent does it represent scholars' efforts to explain it?

The role of chronology, the reliance on transmitted reports, and the diversity of scholarly opinion all suggest that the doctrine developed through interpretation rather than through simple textual transmission alone.

This does not diminish its importance within the tradition. Rather, it underscores the complexity of relating historical context, revelation, and interpretation. Understanding this process is essential for evaluating how *naskh* has been used and how it continues to be understood.

In the next chapter, we will examine the different types of *naskh*. These categories clarify how the doctrine

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was applied in practice and why it remains a subject of ongoing discussion.

Chapter 3

The Modes (Types) of *Naskh*

Why Classify *Naskh*?

As the doctrine of *naskh* developed, Muslim scholars recognized that not all instances of abrogation were of the same kind. Some involved changes in legal rulings, others the removal of wording, and still others appeared to combine both. To clarify these distinctions, scholars began classifying *naskh* into distinct categories.

By the third century of Islam, this classificatory scheme had become more formalized, particularly among scholars of legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*).¹⁷

Without such classifications, discussions of *naskh* would remain unclear and often confusing.

¹⁷ Ibn Ḥazm, *Maʿrifat al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh*, 393 ff

The Three Main Types

Classical scholars generally recognized three main types of *naskh*.

- Abrogation of both ruling and wording
- Abrogation of the ruling, but not the wording
- Abrogation of the wording, but not the ruling

These categories became widely discussed, though not without debate. Each represents a different perspective on how change can occur within revelation.

1. Abrogation of Both Ruling and Wording (*Naskh al-ḥukm wa al-tilāwa*)

This category refers to cases in which a passage was understood to have been revealed and practiced, but both its wording and its ruling were later no longer applied. Scholars explained this by suggesting that God caused these passages to be removed from the Qur'an or no longer retained.

Examples from the Tradition

Reports attributed to early Muslims recount instances in which individuals remembered verses that were no