

The Suez Canal and the Qur'anic 'Meeting of the Two Seas': How a Man-Made Waterway Reshaped a Centuries-Old Interpretation

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ملخص البحث:

قناة السويس وأثرها في إعادة تشكيل تفسير "مجمع البحرين" القرآني

شكّلت مفاهيم "مجمع البحرين" و"البرزخ" في القرآن الكريم محوراً رئيساً في دراسات التفسير على مر العصور. وقد هيمن تاريخياً تفسير يربط هذه المفاهيم بشكل مباشر ببرزخ السويس، الحاجز الأرضي الفاصل بين بحر الشام (المتوسط) وبحر اليمن (الأحمر). تطرح هذا البحث حجة مفادها أن مشروع شق قناة السويس عام 1869م مثل نقطة تحوّل فكرية وعقدية، حيث وجّه تحدياً جذرياً لهذا التفسير الجغرافي الثابت. فمن خلال التجاوز المادي لهذا الحاجز، أحدثت القناة نقلة نوعية في مسار التفسير القرآني، إذ انتقل الاهتمام من حصر المفهوم في موقع جغرافي جامد، إلى تبني فهم أكثر عالمية وديناميكية، يركز على الظواهر الكونية المشاهدة. ويبرهن هذا التطور على حيوية التفسير القرآني، كما يُسلط الضوء على ثراء النصّ وقابليته لاحتواء دلالات متعددة الطبقات، تجد صداها في خضمّ التطورات العلمية والمستجدات التاريخية.

Abstract:

The Qur'anic concepts of the "meeting of the two seas" (*Majma' al-Bahrayn*) and the "barrier" (*Barzakh*) that separates them have been subjects of Islamic exegesis for centuries. For much of history, a dominant interpretation identified these concepts with the Isthmus of Suez, the land barrier separating the Mediterranean Sea (*Bahr al-Sham*) and the Red Sea (*Bahr al-Yaman*). This paper argues that the construction of the Suez Canal in 1869 served as an intellectual and theological catalyst, fundamentally challenging this geographically fixed

interpretation. By physically transgressing the land barrier, the canal prompted a paradigm shift in Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), moving the focus from a literal, static location to a more universal, dynamic understanding rooted in observable natural phenomena. This evolution demonstrates the adaptability of Qur'anic interpretation and highlights the text's capacity for layered meanings that resonate with scientific and historical developments.

Keywords: Qur'anic exegesis, Tafsir, Suez Canal, Majma' al-Bahrayn, Barzakh, Bahr al-Sham, Bahr al-Yaman

Introduction

The Qur'an speaks in several places of a "meeting of the two seas" and a "barrier" that keeps them distinct. In Surah Ar-Rahman, it states, "He released the two seas, meeting [side by side]; Between them is a barrier (Barzakh) which they do not transgress" (Qur'an 55:19-20). A similar concept appears in Surah Al-Furqan, which describes "one fresh and sweet, and one salty and bitter, and He placed between them a barrier and a forbidding partition" (Qur'an 25:53). Similarly, Surah Al-Kahf describes the Prophet Moses's journey to the "junction of the two seas" (*Majma' al-Bahrayn*) to meet the enigmatic figure Khidr (Qur'an 18:60). For centuries, commentators sought to pinpoint the physical location of this junction and barrier.

Based on the geographical knowledge of the time, many classical scholars identified this location as the Isthmus of Suez, the narrow strip of land separating the Mediterranean and Red Seas. This interpretation was logical and dominant. However, the successful engineering of the Suez Canal in the 19th century created a direct waterway that not only removed the land barrier but also allowed the waters of the two seas to mix. This paper examines how this modern, man-made intervention reshaped a centuries-old religious interpretation, acting as a catalyst for a more nuanced and universal understanding of these powerful Qur'anic verses.

The Pre-Canal Geographical and Exegetical Reality

Medieval Islamic geographers and historians had a clear and consistent understanding of the two major seas flanking the Arabian Peninsula. The Mediterranean was commonly known as *Bahr al-Rum* (the Sea of the Romans) or, more specifically in its eastern parts, *Bahr al-Sham* (the Sea of the Levant), as it bordered the lands of historic Syria (al-Ḥamawī, 1995; al-Samʿānī, 1962). The body of water to the south, encompassing the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, was known as *Bahr al-Yaman* (the Sea of Yemen) or, interchangeably, *Bahr al-Qulzum*, *Bahr Faris* (the Persian Sea), and *Bahr al-Hind* (the Indian Sea) (al-Maqrīzī, 1418 H; al-Samhūdī, 1419 H).

Crucially, these two seas were separated by a physical land barrier. Trade and travel between them necessitated a laborious overland journey. Merchants traveling from Europe or the Levant would disembark at the port of Farama on the Mediterranean coast and transport their goods by land to the port of Qulzum on the Red Sea, from where they would resume their journey by sea towards India and China (Ibn Khurdādhbah, 1889; al-Iṣṭakhrī, c. 951/1927). The distance of this land route was recorded variously as a journey of one to several days, confirming its status as a definitive barrier (al-Iṣṭakhrī, c. 951/1927; al-Maqrīzī, 1418 H; al-Nuwayrī, 2002).

Given this geographical reality, it was natural for many early commentators to conclude that the Isthmus of Suez was the location of the Qur'anic *Barzakh* and *Majma' al-Bahrayn*. This interpretation is explicitly articulated in early exegetical works. The renowned early commentator Qatadah, for instance, is reported to have identified the "junction of the two seas" mentioned in Moses's journey as the meeting point of the eastern and western seas: "The two seas are the Sea of Persia and the Sea of Rome. The Sea of Rome is on the western side, and the Sea of Persia is on the eastern side" (as cited in al-Ṭabarī, 2000). This identification directly linked the Qur'anic narrative to the well-known geographical divide between the Mediterranean and Red Sea systems.

This interpretation was historically grounded and tangibly real. Indeed, several rulers throughout history had contemplated or attempted to dig a canal to connect the seas, from the Pharaohs to Persian kings and later Muslim rulers like 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ and the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid. These projects were abandoned, often due to strategic fears that a canal would expose the holy sites of the Hijaz to naval attacks from Byzantine Rome (al-Maqrīzī, 1418 H; al-Mas'ūdī, 1894). These failed attempts only reinforced the perception of the isthmus as a permanent, divinely-willed barrier.

The Impact of the Suez Canal: An Interpretive Rupture

The historical status quo was shattered in the 19th century. Under the initiative of French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps and with the backing of Egyptian ruler Sa'id Pasha, the Suez Canal Company was formed. After a decade of construction, the canal was officially opened on November 17, 1869, creating a 193-kilometer navigable waterway between the Mediterranean and Red Seas (Suez Canal Authority, n.d.).

This event posed a profound interpretive challenge. The Qur'an described the *Barzakh* as a barrier that the seas "do not transgress." By engineering a canal, humankind had seemingly enabled this transgression, removing the very land barrier many believed the Qur'an was referencing. If the verse's meaning was exclusively tied to the Isthmus of Suez, its timelessness and divine authority appeared compromised by a feat of modern engineering. This forced a critical re-evaluation of the established literalist exegesis.

The Evolution of Tafsir: From Static Geography to Dynamic Principle

The construction of the canal did not invalidate the Qur'anic verse; rather, it served as a catalyst for a deeper, more resilient interpretation. It compelled a shift away from identifying a static, mutable location toward understanding a universal, dynamic principle.

The Scientific Barzakh

Modern exegesis, often in dialogue with science, increasingly understands the *barzakh* not as a landmass but as an oceanographic phenomenon. When two bodies of water with different properties (such as salinity, density, or temperature) meet, they do not immediately and completely mix. A fluid, invisible barrier, known to science as a halocline or thermocline, forms between them. This phenomenon is observable at countless locations worldwide, such as the Strait of Gibraltar where the Atlantic and Mediterranean meet, or at estuaries where freshwater rivers flow into saltwater seas.

This interpretation resolves the challenge posed by the Suez Canal. The *barzakh* is a universal law of nature, a recurring sign (*ayah*) of God's power and order in creation. Its truth is not dependent on the geography of one isthmus but is affirmed by scientific observation globally.

Conclusion

The construction of the Suez Canal stands as a pivotal moment in the history of Qur'anic interpretation. It did not undermine the scripture, but instead revealed the limitations of a purely literalist exegesis tied to a specific, mutable geographical point. It catalyzed a paradigm shift, guiding commentators toward a more profound, universal, and scientifically resonant understanding of the "meeting of the two seas." The *barzakh* is now widely understood as a timeless principle in the laws of nature. The episode demonstrates the intellectual dynamism of Islamic thought and affirms that the enduring miracle of the Qur'an lies not in pointing to a static feature on a map, but in describing universal truths that unfold and find new relevance across time and human discovery.

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