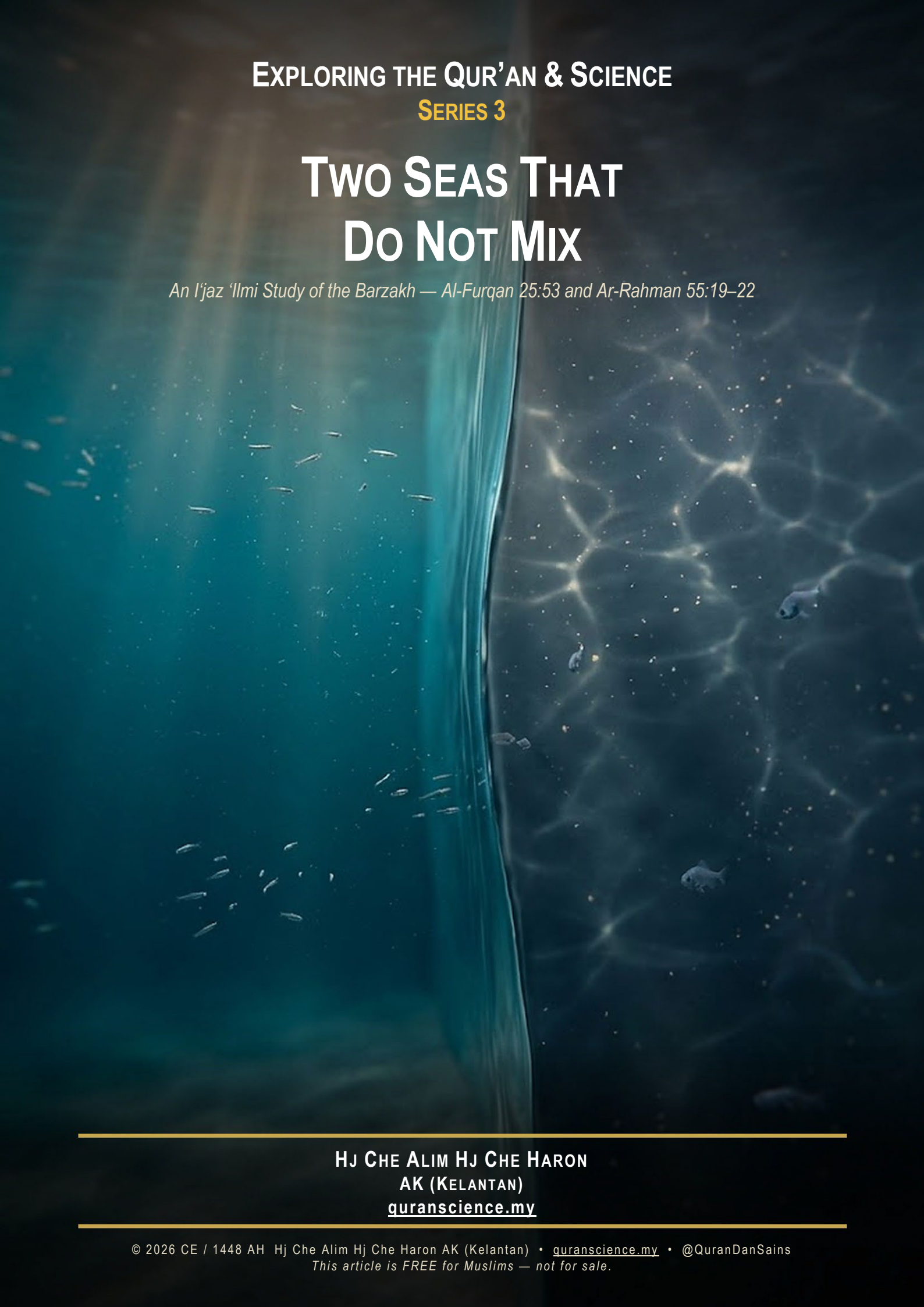

EXPLORING THE QUR'AN & SCIENCE

SERIES 3

TWO SEAS THAT DO NOT MIX

An I'jaz 'Ilmi Study of the Barzakh — Al-Furqan 25:53 and Ar-Rahman 55:19–22

HJ CHE ALIM HJ CHE HARON

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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An I'jaz 'Ilmi Study of the Barzakh — Al-Furqan 25:53 and Ar-Rahman 55:19–22

بَيْنَهُمَا بَرْزَخٌ لَّا يَبْغِيَانِ

"Between them is a barrier [so] neither of them transgresses."

SURAH AR-RAHMAN 55:20

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All praise is due to Allah, who released the two seas side by side, one fresh and one salty, and placed between them a barrier that neither transgresses. Blessings and peace be upon the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, and upon his family and his Companions.

This article is specially dedicated to my beloved wife,

ZAHARAH MOHD LATIF;

my dear children,

MUHAMMAD HAFIZ, NOOR HAZWANI, ABDUL HAKIM, NOOR HIDAYAH, NOR AQILA and **NOR ATIQAH**;

and my sons- and daughters-in-law,

FAZILAH, MALEK, HANIN, FAIRIZAL and **FIRWAN**.

Whenever we see a river meet the sea, may we remember the countless favours of our Lord — and may this article be 'ilmun yuntafa'u bih, knowledge that brings benefit.

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ABOUT THE COVER OF THIS ARTICLE

The cover of this article does not depict any human being. It shows **an underwater scene**: on the left, **blue-green water** pierced by sunlight, with small fish swimming; on the right, **darker water**; and in the middle, **a boundary separating** the two.

The image is inspired by the words of Allah: ***"He released the two seas, meeting [side by side]"***. ***"Between them is a barrier [so] neither of them transgresses"*** (55:19–20).

Note: The boundary on this cover is **a symbolic depiction**. In nature, the boundary between two bodies of water is not an upright wall, but a layered **transition zone** (see Section 5). **Two gold lines** at the bottom frame the author's name.

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Colour guide: green box = verses of the Qur'an; gold box = Hadith; blue box = scientific finding; blue table = comparison. Underlined blue narrator names can be clicked to open the narrator's page on sunnah.com.

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TWO SEAS THAT DO NOT MIX

At the mouth of a river, fresh water meets salt water. In the straits that connect two seas, two different bodies of water flow side by side. The Qur'an mentions this phenomenon in several surahs with one very concentrated word: ***barzakh*** — a boundary or barrier between the two.

This article explains those verses according to the Arabic language and the exegesis of the scholars, then presents the findings of modern oceanography with references that can be checked. At the end, we assess honestly where the harmony lies, and where we need to be cautious — including about one photograph that has gone viral on social media.

Note: The translation of the Qur'anic verses in this article is Sahih International. Every scientific finding is given with a link to its original source.

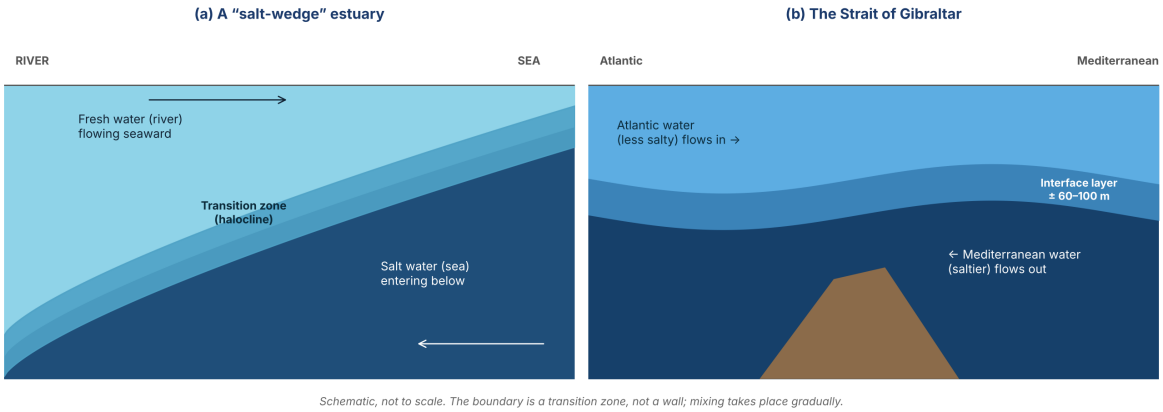

Figure 1: Two examples of boundaries between bodies of water — (a) an estuary and (b) the Strait of Gibraltar.

Figure 1 shows two examples explained in Section 5. In both, the less dense water lies on top, the denser water below, and between them lies a transition zone.

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FRESH WATER AND SALT WATER

SURAH AL-FURQAN 25:53

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى مَرَجَ ٱلْبَحْرَيْنِ هَٰذَا عَذْبٌ فُرَاتٌ وَهَٰذَا مِلْحٌ أُجَاجٌ وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَهُمَا بَرْزَخًا وَحِجْرًا مَّحْجُورًا ﴿٥٣﴾

And it is He who has released [simultaneously] the two seas, one fresh and sweet and one salty and bitter, and He placed between them a barrier and prohibiting partition.

Translation: Sahih International — quran.com/25:53

COMMENTARY ON VERSE 25:53 — TWO WATERS OF DIFFERENT NATURE

First: Released side by side. ***"And it is He who has released [simultaneously] the two seas"***. The word ***maraja*** means to release or let flow. The two waters are released to meet — not confined far apart from each other.

Second: Two opposite qualities. ***"one fresh and sweet and one salty and bitter"***. The Qur'an uses two pairs of qualities: ***'adhbun furāt*** (fresh and refreshing) and ***milḥun ujāj*** (salty and bitter).

Third: Barzakh and hijr mahjur. ***"and He placed between them a barrier and prohibiting partition"***. Two terms are used: ***barzakh*** (something that lies between two things and separates them) and ***ḥijran maḥjūrā*** (a partition that truly prevents).

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MEETING, YET NOT TRANSGRESSING

SURAH AR-RAHMAN 55:19–22

مَرَجَ ٱلۡبَحۡرَيۡنِ يَلۡتَقِيَانِ ١٩

He released the two seas, meeting [side by side].

بَيۡنَهُمَا بَرۡزَخٞ لَّا يَبۡغِيَانِ ٢٠

Between them is a barrier [so] neither of them transgresses.

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ٢١

So which of the favors of your Lord would you deny.

يَخۡرُجُ مِنۡهُمَا ٱللُّؤۡلُؤُ وَٱلۡمَرۡجَانُ ٢٢

From both of them emerge pearl and coral.

Translation: Sahih International — quran.com/55:19-22

COMMENTARY ON VERSES 55:19–22 — THEY MEET, YET THERE IS A BARRIER

First: The two meet. ***"meeting [side by side]" — yaltaqiyān***. This is important: the barrier exists ***even though*** the two waters touch.

Second: Not transgressing. ***"neither of them transgresses" — lā yabghiyān***. The word ***baghā*** means to exceed limits or to overpower. One water does not immediately overwhelm the nature of the other.

Third: A favour repeated. ***"So which of the favors of your Lord would you deny"***? This verse is repeated 31 times in Surah Ar-Rahman. Even the meeting of two waters is counted as a ***favour*** — for life in estuaries and along coasts depends on it.

Fourth: Pearl and coral. ***"From both of them emerge pearl and coral"***. The exegetes discussed the meaning of "from both", since pearl and coral usually come from the salt sea; some explained that when something comes from one of two things mentioned together, it may be attributed to both. Tafsir Ibn Kathir 55:22

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VERSES THAT COMPLETE THE PICTURE

SURAH AN-NAML 27:61

أَمَّن جَعَلَ ٱلْأَرْضَ قَرَارًا وَجَعَلَ خِلَٰلَهَآ أَنْهَٰرًا وَجَعَلَ لَهَا رَوَٰسِيَ وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَ ٱلْبَحْرَيْنِ حَاجِزًا ۗ أَءِلَٰهٌ مَّعَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

Is He [not best] who made the earth a stable ground and placed within it rivers and made for it firmly set mountains and placed between the two seas a barrier? Is there a deity with Allah? [No], but most of them do not know.

Translation: Sahih International — quran.com/27:61

In Surah An-Naml, Allah mentions several signs of His power one after another — a stable earth, rivers, firm mountains — and that He ***"placed between the two seas a barrier"***. The word used is ***ḥājizā*** — a barrier. Then Allah asks: ***"Is there a deity with Allah"***?

TWO WATERS THAT ARE NOT ALIKE

Surah Fatir emphasises the difference in nature and the shared blessing: ***"And not alike are the two bodies of water. One is fresh and sweet, palatable for drinking, and one is salty and bitter"***. Yet ***"from each you eat tender meat"*** (35:12). Two different waters, both a source of provision.

REMARKS — ONE THEME, FOUR SURAHS

The theme of two different waters appears in at least four surahs: Al-Furqan, Ar-Rahman, An-Naml and Fatir. Each verse emphasises a different angle — the difference in nature, the meeting, the barrier, and the blessing — but all lead to one goal: to know and thank the Creator.

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WHAT THE EXEGETES SAID

How did the early scholars understand ***barzakh***? This matters, so that we do not force a modern meaning onto the verse.

FRESH WATER AND SALT WATER

Imam Ibn Kathir explains that the fresh water is ***rivers, springs and wells*** flowing among people, while the salt water is the known ***seas*** of east and west. He adds that among the wisdoms of making sea water salty is that the air does not become foul from the creatures that die in it. Tafsir Ibn Kathir 25:53

THE MEANING OF BARZAKH

Ibn Kathir's view: ***barzakh*** here is the ***land*** that separates the sea and the rivers, so that neither water transgresses upon the other. Tafsir Ibn Kathir 55:20

Other views: Imam al-Tabari relates various views of the Salaf, including a report from Ibn 'Abbas رضى الله عنهما that ***barzakh*** is a ***ḥājiz*** — a barrier. Some scholars understood it as a barrier made by Allah's power, not necessarily visible. Tafsir al-Tabari 55:20

REMARKS — A BROAD EXPRESSION

The word ***barzakh*** is broad enough to include the land that separates rivers from the sea, and also an unseen barrier where the two meet. Verse 55:19 itself says the two ***meet***, so the contemporary reading of a boundary within the water itself is a possibility worth reflecting on — but it is not the only interpretation, nor an agreed one.

A note of scholarly honesty: After checking, there is no authentic Hadith that specifically explains the phenomenon of "two seas that do not mix". This article links the verses of the Qur'an and the exegesis of the scholars directly with scientific findings.

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WHAT MODERN OCEANOGRAPHY SAYS

Waters of different ***salinity*** and ***temperature*** have different ***densities***. Less dense water (fresher or warmer) tends to lie above denser water (saltier or colder). Between them forms a transition zone called a ***halocline*** (a sharp change in salinity) or a ***pycnocline*** (a sharp change in density).

SCIENTIFIC FINDING: ESTUARIES: THE SALT WEDGE

In estuaries where the river flow is strong and the tides are weak, fresh river water ***floats*** on top of the sea water, while the sea water enters beneath it as a ***salt wedge***. According to NOAA, the boundary between the two layers is sharp, and there is only slight mixing at that boundary.

But NOAA also explains that in other estuaries, especially those with strong tides, fresh and salt water ***mix partly or completely***. So the degree of "not mixing" depends on local conditions.

STUDY REFERENCES:

NOAA National Ocean Service. Classifying Estuaries: By Water Circulation. Estuaries Tutorial. https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/education/tutorial_estuaries/est05_circulation.html

SCIENTIFIC FINDING: THE STRAIT OF GIBRALTAR: THE ATLANTIC MEETS THE MEDITERRANEAN

At the Strait of Gibraltar, less salty Atlantic water flows ***into*** the Mediterranean in the upper layer, while saltier, denser Mediterranean water flows ***out*** to the Atlantic in the lower layer. The study by Bryden, Candela and Kinder (1994), based on a year of current measurements, shows this two-layer exchange with a boundary that can be defined by a particular salinity contour.

Bray, Ochoa and Kinder (1995) found that the ***interface layer*** between the two water masses is about 60 to 100 metres thick — a transition zone, not a wall. The two water masses remain distinguishable in their properties, even though mixing takes place within that layer.

STUDY REFERENCES:

Bryden, H.L., Candela, J. & Kinder, T.H. (1994). Exchange through the Strait of Gibraltar. Progress in Oceanography, 33(3), 201–248. https://doi.org/10.1016/0079-6611(94)90028-0

Bray, N.A., Ochoa, J. & Kinder, T.H. (1995). The role of the interface in exchange through the Strait of Gibraltar. JGR Oceans, 100(C6), 10755–10776. https://doi.org/10.1029/95JC00381

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SCIENTIFIC FINDING: A LABORATORY MODEL OF THE STRAIT OF GIBRALTAR (2026)

Tassigny and colleagues (2026) built a large rotating laboratory model reproducing the topography, tides and layered structure of the Strait of Gibraltar. They found that ***turbulence*** around Camarinal Sill comes mostly from layers at the sea floor, rather than from shear at the interface — and that tides strongly influence the dilution of the outflowing Mediterranean water.

Studies like this show that the boundary between two water masses is a dynamic and complex system — a topic still actively researched today.

STUDY REFERENCES:

Tassigny, A. et al. (2026). A realistic physical model of the Gibraltar Strait. Ocean Science, 22, 459–500. https://doi.org/10.5194/os-22-459-2026

SCIENTIFIC FINDING: THE BARRIER LAYER OFF THE AMAZON

Pailler, Bourlès and Gouriou (1999) found that fresh water from the Amazon River forms a strong halocline in the western tropical Atlantic. This halocline creates a ***barrier layer*** that reduces mixing between surface water and the water beneath — hundreds of kilometres from the river mouth.

STUDY REFERENCES:

Pailler, K., Bourlès, B. & Gouriou, Y. (1999). The barrier layer in the western tropical Atlantic Ocean. Geophysical Research Letters, 26(14), 2069–2072. https://doi.org/10.1029/1999GL900492

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THE VIRAL "TWO OCEANS MEET" PHOTO

A photograph is often shared on social media with the claim that it shows where "the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans meet but do not mix", and it is linked to verses 55:19–20. Scholarly honesty requires us to explain this photograph correctly.

SCIENTIFIC FINDING: WHAT THE PHOTO ACTUALLY SHOWS

The photograph was taken in the **Gulf of Alaska** by ocean scientist Ken Bruland in 2007. It shows ***glacial meltwater*** from rivers carrying fine sediment (called "glacial flour") meeting the sea water of the gulf. The difference in colour is caused by the sediment, not by two oceans.

According to Bruland's explanation, the two waters ***do eventually mix***; the boundary seen in the photo is a strong gradient at a particular moment, which shifts and fades.

STUDY REFERENCES:

Snopes. Are Two Oceans Meeting in This Photograph? https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/merging-oceans

REMARKS — NO NEED FOR WEAK EVIDENCE

The verses of the Qur'an about the two seas are true in themselves. We do not need a misinterpreted photograph to support them. Sharing false claims in the name of I'jaz 'Ilmi actually ***harms*** da'wah, because they are easily refuted.

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BETWEEN HARMONY AND CAUTION

The table below separates solid claims from exaggerated ones on this topic.

POPULAR CLAIMS AND THEIR ASSESSMENT

CLAIMS OFTEN HEARD	ASSESSMENT
"The Qur'an mentions two different waters meeting with a barrier between them."	Solid. Mentioned in 25:53, 55:19–20 and 27:61.
"The early exegetes understood barzakh as a halocline."	Inaccurate. Ibn Kathir understood it as land; other scholars as a barrier made by Allah's power. The halocline is a contemporary reading.
"The water at the boundary does not mix at all."	Inaccurate. Science shows mixing takes place gradually; what exists is a transition zone that preserves the difference in properties. The words "lā yabghiyān" (neither transgresses) fit this meaning.
"The Gulf of Alaska photo shows the Atlantic and Pacific meeting."	Wrong. It is glacial meltwater meeting sea water in the Gulf of Alaska, and the two eventually mix.
"This phenomenon can only be detected with modern instruments."	Partly. Sailors have long known the difference between fresh and salt water at river mouths; what needs modern instruments is measuring the layered structure and its transition zone.

REMARKS — THE FITTING WONDER

The wonder of these verses is not the claim that "people of old did not know fresh and salt water differ", but the precision of a brief picture: two waters ***meet***, yet there is a ***barzakh*** so that neither ***transgresses*** its limit — and both are a source of provision. That picture remains accurate even when examined with modern instruments.

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FAVOURS THAT ARE NOT DENIED

Surah Ar-Rahman mentions the meeting of the two seas in the middle of a list of favours, and closes it with the repeated question: ***"So which of the favors of your Lord would you deny"***?

LESSONS FROM THIS ARTICLE

First: The universe runs by orderly laws. Water follows its density — by Allah's decree.

Second: Difference need not mean hostility. Two different waters meet, each keeps its own nature, and both bring benefit.

Third: Respect the exegesis of the scholars. A scientific reading complements, it does not replace.

Fourth: Do not spread weak evidence. Check before you share.

Fifth: Be grateful for the blessing of water. Fresh water to drink, salt water for provision and travel (35:12).

CONCLUSION

The Qur'an describes two waters of different nature — one fresh, one salty — released until they meet, yet with a ***barzakh*** between them so that neither transgresses its limit. The early scholars understood this with meanings true in their time; modern oceanography has found transition zones that preserve the different properties of water. Both meet at one truth: **this universe is ordered with careful measure by the All-Wise Creator.**

Whenever we see a river flowing into the sea, may we remember Allah's countless favours. And Allah knows best.

In sha Allah, the series **Exploring the Qur'an & Science** will continue with the next article, using the same method: the Qur'an, authentic Hadith, the exegesis of the scholars, and only solid scientific findings.

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FACT CHECK

Snopes. Are Two Oceans Meeting in This Photograph? https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/merging-oceans

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SURAH AL-BAQARAH 2:261

مَّثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ يُنفِقُونَ أَمۡوَٰلَهُمۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ حَبَّةٍ أَنۢبَتَتۡ سَبۡعَ سَنَابِلَ فِي كُلِّ سُنۢبُلَةٖ مِّاْئَةُ حَبَّةٖۗ وَٱللَّهُ يُضَٰعِفُ لِمَن يَشَآءُۚ وَٱللَّهُ وَٰسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ ٢٦١

The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is like a seed [of grain] which grows seven spikes; in each spike is a hundred grains. And Allah multiplies [His reward] for whom He wills. And Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing.

Translation: Sahih International — quran.com/2:261

SURAH SABA' 34:39

قُلۡ إِنَّ رَبِّي يَبۡسُطُ ٱلرِّزۡقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ مِنۡ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَقۡدِرُ لَهُۥۚ وَمَآ أَنفَقۡتُم مِّن شَيۡءٖ فَهُوَ يُخۡلِفُهُۥۖ وَهُوَ خَيۡرُ ٱلرَّٰزِقِينَ ٣٩

Say, "Indeed, my Lord extends provision for whom He wills of His servants and restricts [it] for him. But whatever thing you spend [in His cause] - He will compensate it; and He is the best of providers."

Translation: Sahih International — quran.com/34:39

HADITH — SAHIH MUSLIM, NO. 2588

حَدَّثَنَا يَحْيَى بْنُ أَيُّوبَ، وَقُتَيْبَةُ، وَابْنُ، حُجْرٍ قَالُوا حَدَّثَنَا إِسْمَاعِيلُ، - وَهُوَ ابْنُ جَعْفَرٍ - عَنِ الْعَلاَءِ، عَنْ أَبِيهِ، عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، عَنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صلى الله عليه وسلم قَالَ « مَا نَقَصَتْ صَدَقَةٌ مِنْ مَالٍ وَمَا زَادَ اللَّهُ عَبْدًا بِعَفْوٍ إِلاَّ عِزًّا وَمَا تَوَاضَعَ أَحَدٌ لِلَّهِ إِلاَّ رَفَعَهُ اللَّهُ ».

TRANSLATION:

Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه narrated that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "Charity does not decrease wealth.

Allah does not increase a servant who forgives except in honour. And no one humbles himself for the sake of Allah except that Allah raises him in rank."

CHAIN OF NARRATION: Narrated by Imam Muslim: from Yahya bin Ayyub, Qutaibah bin Sa'id and 'Ali bin Hujr, from Isma'il bin Ja'far, from al-'Ala' bin 'Abd al-Rahman, from his father 'Abd al-Rahman bin Ya'qub, from Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه .

REFERENCE: Narrated by Imam Muslim in Sahih Muslim, Book of Virtue, Good Manners and Joining the Ties of Kinship (Kitab al-Birr wa al-Silah wa al-Adab), chapter on the encouragement of forgiveness and humility, Hadith No. 2588.

GRADE: SAHIH — contained in Sahih Muslim.

Source: https://sunnah.com/muslim:2588

HADITH — SAHIH MUSLIM, NO. 1631

حَدَّثَنَا يَحْيَى بْنُ أَيُّوبَ، وَقُتَيْبَةُ - يَعْنِي ابْنَ سَعِيدٍ - وَابْنُ حُجْرٍ قَالُوا حَدَّثَنَا إِسْمَاعِيلُ، - هُوَ ابْنُ جَعْفَرٍ - عَنِ الْعَلاَءِ، عَنْ أَبِيهِ، عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صلى الله عليه وسلم قَالَ « إِذَا مَاتَ الإِنْسَانُ انْقَطَعَ عَنْهُ عَمَلُهُ إِلاَّ مِنْ ثَلاَثَةٍ إِلاَّ مِنْ صَدَقَةٍ جَارِيَةٍ أَوْ عِلْمٍ يُنْتَفَعُ بِهِ أَوْ وَلَدٍ صَالِحٍ يَدْعُو لَهُ ».

TRANSLATION:

Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه narrated that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "When a person dies, his deeds come to an end except for three: an ongoing charity, knowledge that is benefited from, or a righteous child who prays for him."

CHAIN OF NARRATION: Narrated by Imam Muslim: from Yahya bin Ayyub, Qutaibah bin Sa'id and 'Ali bin Hujr, from Isma'il bin Ja'far, from al-'Ala' bin 'Abd al-Rahman, from his father 'Abd al-Rahman bin Ya'qub, from Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه .

REFERENCE: Narrated by Imam Muslim in Sahih Muslim, Book of Wills (Kitab al-Wasiyyah), chapter on the reward that reaches a person after his death, Hadith No. 1631.

GRADE: SAHIH — contained in Sahih Muslim.

Source: https://sunnah.com/muslim:1631

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