

***Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations***

Volume 1, Issue 1 / 2016

***The Islamic State in Comparative and Historical Perspective***

Edited by Michael Pregill

[www.mizanproject.org/journal-issue/the-islamic-state-in-historical-and-comparative-perspective/](http://www.mizanproject.org/journal-issue/the-islamic-state-in-historical-and-comparative-perspective/)

## Response to Michael Pregill, “ISIS, Eschatology, and Exegesis”

**Kenneth Garden**

<http://www.mizanproject.org/journal-post/response-to-michael-pregill-isis-eschatology-and-exegesis/>

Michael Pregill’s approach here is a fruitful alternative to the question: “How Islamic is ISIS?” In its place he asks: “What kind of Muslims make up ISIS? Whom in Islamic history do they most resemble in their rhetoric and use of scripture, and what does this tell us about their position, their appeal, and—perhaps—their prospects?”

The parallel he has found, the Isma’ili Shi’ite Fatimid dynasty of the tenth to twelfth centuries, is a striking one. ISIS is a fanatically sectarian Sunni movement, and it is ironic that the group’s unusual interpretation of the episode of Noah’s Ark in its online magazine *Dabiq* was anticipated by a Shi’ite dynasty. But the point here is not that this makes ISIS somehow unconsciously Shi’ite. Rather it suggests that ISIS, like the Fatimids, is trying to legitimate itself and the gruesome violence it perpetrates to a Muslim community that largely rejects its message. The Fatimids ruled over North Africa and the Levant from Egypt. Their Muslim subjects, even in the capital city they founded, Cairo, remained Sunni. ISIS likewise has proclaimed a new caliphate and demands recognition from a worldwide Muslim community that has roundly rejected its call. Both groups resort to scriptural rhetoric to justify their earthly failure to win a mass following and threaten recalcitrant fellow Muslims.

As Pregill explains, the Noah of the Qur’ān called to his community over and over to abandon its sinful ways, to no avail. Of course his sinful neighbors would be punished in the afterlife for their rejection, but God and his prophet were not content with that. Rather, they had to be threatened with an earthly punishment to compel earthly compliance. The proselytizing of the Fatimids among their Sunni subjects fell on deaf ears, just as ISIS finds most all of the world’s Muslims

content to inhabit what it has defined as the “grayzone” of Islamic practice that does not recognize the group’s religious and political authority. For these deniers, the flood looms.

Of course, the ISIS leadership takes their interpretation of the Noah story in a different direction; for them, ISIS itself *is* the flood. Invoking the incident of the *mubāhalah*, as the Fatimids did as well, though to a different end, ISIS links it to the Noah narrative, referring to “the Flood of the Mubāhalah.”<sup>1</sup> Much as Muḥammad frightened his opponents into backing down in a religious dispute by invoking God’s curses on whichever party was in the wrong, ISIS threatens its own opponents with destruction—*at its hands*—if they continue to oppose the group. ISIS is the messenger and the punishment in one, even as the group also claims to be the harbinger of a coming apocalypse.

These are Islamic arguments, but not because they objectively represent “true” Islamic doctrine as plainly stated in scripture. As Pregill points out, ISIS seeks to legitimate itself scripturally by invoking qur’ānic passages or *ḥadīth* that proclaim the sanctity of the pious minority, such as the *ḥadīth* of the stranger, which states that “Islam began as a stranger and will return to being a stranger as it began, so blessed be the strangers,” or the *ḥadīth* of the “saved sect,” in which the Prophet says that his community will be divided into seventy (or seventy-two) sects, of which all but one will end up in hellfire.<sup>2</sup>

But Islamic scripture can be invoked to make precisely the opposite case by invoking *ḥadīth* such as “If you see a dispute, side with the majority,” or “my community will never agree upon an error.”<sup>3</sup> What makes a group (very) Islamic, as Graeme Wood says of ISIS, is not its doctrine or the amount of scripture it cites, but rather its ability to present its doctrine in a language that links it to Islamic scripture and tradition in a way that other Muslims feel obliged to engage with it. This is not to say that doing so will win a majority following; a wide-ranging consensus could still reject and refute ISIS’ doctrine, as indeed it has. The point is that other Muslims feel addressed in a way they don’t by moral claims that invoke the life of the Buddha or the letters of Paul.

Pregill’s exercise here points to a typology of Islamic self-representation and legitimation. What kind of Muslims avail themselves of the sorts of interpretations of the particular texts that ISIS evokes? Minority groups resigned to the rejection of their understanding of Islam by the Muslim population over which they claim sovereignty. With this reading of the Noah story, ISIS, like the Fatimids before them, makes its rejection by its fellow Muslims a point of pride. The group’s leadership cast themselves as lonely proclaimers of God’s truth in a gray, apostate world who will see themselves vindicated in the end. And they present the violence they threaten and practice to force acquiescence to their rule as godly “intellectual terrorism” with precedent in the life of the Prophet himself.

This is not how a group successfully winning hearts and minds reads scripture. We would do well to remember this when we wonder about their standing in the world Muslim community.

### About the author

[Kenneth Garden](#) received his doctorate in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from the University of Chicago in 2005. He is the author of [The First Islamic Reviver: Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī and his Revival of the Religious Sciences](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). His current research centers on the development of Sufism in North Africa and Muslim Spain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. He also has a website that presents and analyzes examples of religious discourse from different currents in contemporary Egyptian Islam (<https://translatingmuslimvoices.wordpress.com/>).

### Notes

All digital content cited in this article was accessed on or before September 21, 2016.

[1] “The Flood of the Mubāhalah,” *Dabiq* 2 (Ramaḍān 1435 [June–July 2014]): 20–22.

[2] Islam began as a stranger: e.g., Muslim b. Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, imān* 145–146, *bāb* 65 (*bayān anna’l-islām bada`a gharīban...*), nos. 270–271; among the Six Books, this tradition is also attested in the collections of Ibn Majah and al-Tirmidhī. The division of the *ummah* into sects: e.g., Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd, sunna* 1–2, nos. 4579–4580; also attested in Ibn Majah and al-Tirmidhī.

[3] Usually known as the *sawād al-a`zam* or tradition of the ‘greatest majority’: e.g., Muḥammad b. Yazīd Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah, fitan* 25, no. 3950.

This PDF is the text-only version of an article published online at [www.mizanproject.org](http://www.mizanproject.org). It omits images, glosses, annotations, and other subsidiary content included in the online version. This article is authorized for reuse under the terms of a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) License.

