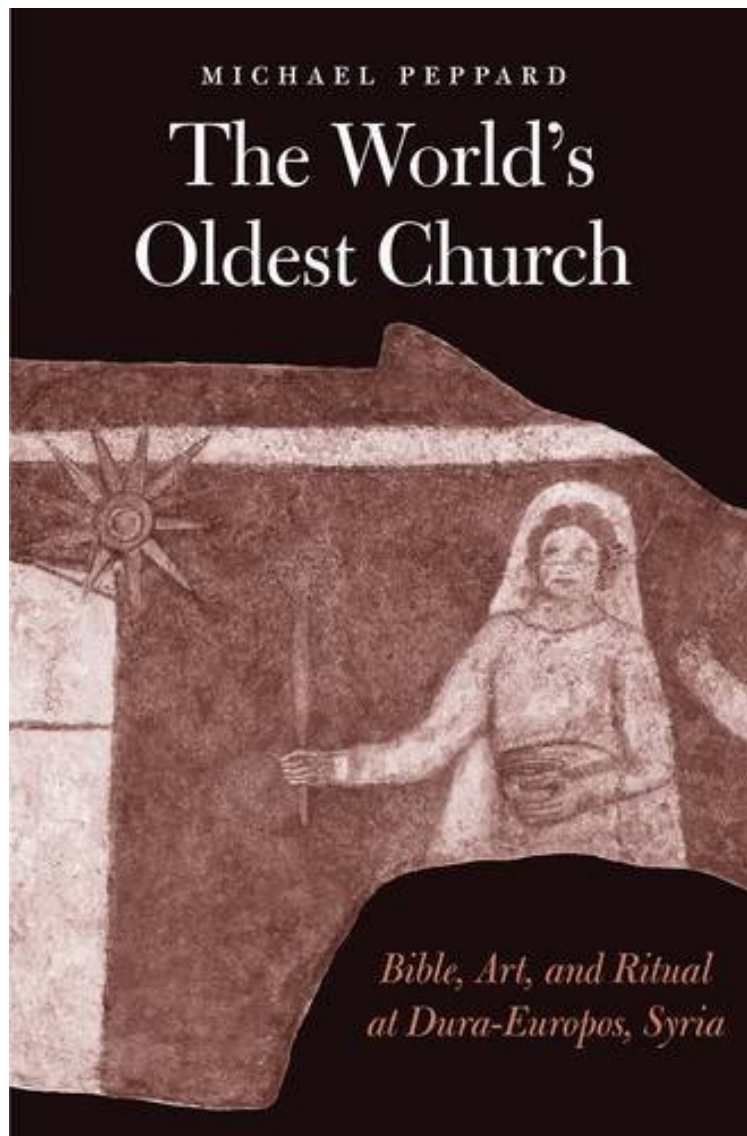


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## The World's Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria (Synkrisis)

*Michael Peppard*

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**Michael Peppard : The World's Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria (Synkrisis)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The World's Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria (Synkrisis):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. I thoroughly enjoyed it and was most enlightenedBy Ernest C.

LisiNew insights, provocative thesis, and an altogether fascinating ride on one painting on the wall of a "woman at the well. ". I thoroughly enjoyed it and was most enlightened, all of which gave me opportunity to write a poem about it. Many thanks! Ernie0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy deo camonWonderful read9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. worth readingBy Stephen GoransonI recommend that libraries obtain this book for its interesting arguments and contributions to learning, though scholars might do well to recognize some shortcomings. It is generally quite well written and produced (a rare exception: consistently misspelling the Protogospel of James scholar George Zervos as Zevros), but it underplays or omits some evidence. If it had presented itself only as arguments for the author's views on the baptistery, that might have helped. But on page 44 it describes itself as "updating the scholarship on every aspect of the house-church since 1967," the date of Carl H. Kraeling's final report on The Christian Building, which remains the single most indispensable volume on the subject. The bibliography, though large, is not complete, and some of it is not used in the way a comprehensive updating would have. For example, Kurt Weitzmann's 1990 volume is listed, but Weitzmann appears just once in the text (not twice as the index mistakes), and then only as a foil by reasonably remarking that a painting of David and Goliath might seem--as many think-- odd in a baptistery, before Peppard argues that it is not odd if one takes into account the Dura Roman garrison. And maybe it was not odd in context, as the little church could identify with young David. Yet Weitzmann's proposals that many paintings had manuscript models (e.g., the Cotton Genesis as used in depicting San Marco Venice Genesis personified days of creation) are not conveyed, and Weitzmann's coauthor Herbert Kessler's significant arguments that the Dura synagogue and church paintings were partially in dialogue are passed over, as would not happen in a comprehensive update. Some important facts are relegated to endnotes. For example, the extraordinary (and justified) decision of the French/Syrian archaeological undertaking (now sadly blocked) at Dura-Europos to refer to it as Europos-Dura, rightly recognizing its predominantly western foundation and rule. Though all agree that the city was multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, multi-etc., Greek language predominates greatly over, say, Syriac, both in the city generally, and specifically in the church, and in the one surely Christian manuscript, a parchment fragment of the Diatessaron (gospel harmony)--in Greek. This book goes sometimes far afield for comparanda and later Syriac texts (interesting as they are) with less focus on early Greek and the synagogue nearby down "wall street." (One finds George Kilpatrick's article on Greek only in the endnotes.) Three of the main assertions are that the woman by the well painting represents Mary rather than (or in addition to?) the Samaritan woman. Following on Dominic Serra's 2006 seminal proposal (which I might give stronger credit than the book does), Peppard makes a good case for the Mary possibility, though a second main assertion, that we always allow for polysemy, may weaken his case somewhat. (Rebecca by a well also?) The third main assertion concerns the procession. Most of the paintings seem not (to me) to require polysemy, though images, like David and Goliath, can be used for multiple purposes and interpretations. Yet that painting is labeled--in Greek (though perhaps in eastern pronunciation), perhaps not by the artist, in effect, insisting against polysemy. The good shepherd painting might have reminded some of David or of pre-Christian Roman art, but, in context, Jesus is not far to seek. The later-added Adam and Eve image beneath him is no identification mystery. Jesus walking on water and Peter about to get wet, again, is fairly plain. The healing scene may draw on synoptics or John or both, but I question whether it is a before and after, or, should I say, after and before sequence. Both Jesus and a healed man gesture to a third abed, as if asking, now, what about you? This primarily leaves the most monumental painting of figures processing toward what I and many take to be a sarcophagus, though some including Peppard say a wedding structure (for several?). Some argue for five "Marys" outside and inside of an--opened--door. Peppard argues for five wise and foolish virgins, though I doubt five foolish virgins would have been given such space, and though one might expect then a shut door. But Peppard does not provide readers with all relevant evidence. E.g., Clark Hopkins, who dug Dura or Europos, concluded there were five figures outside and only three inside--as also indicated in the model made by the dig architect Henry Pearson (Preliminary Report [1934] v. 5, plate XLI)--and Hopkins reaffirmed that configuration in his 1979 book (p. 114). Peppard mentions uncertainty about assuming more women where the plaster is missing (whether to add two more or one--but not zero, p. 115), but he does not quote Kraeling (p. 85) on supposing two more women fitting inside would appear to be "crowded... into too narrow a space." Any reader may check and measure this. In Kraeling's book one could measure Plates XXXIII, XLV.2, and XLVI. Full disclosure: I have argued (with relevant texts and images with numerical assertions) that these figures represent the days from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, three days inside the tomb, as was Jesus, during a time when resurrection was associated, by contemporaries, with the eighth day. If I may mention the publication (available online at my page by searching the title), as it is not in this book's bibliography: Stephen Goranson, "7 vs. 8, the Battle over the Holy Day at Dura-Europos," Bible Review, August 1996, pages 22-33 and 44. Peppard argues against death and resurrection focus in this baptistery and instead offers themes or motifs such as "empowerment" (pp. 45, 218), which might sound to some as a retrojection. But others may write more learned reviews, and mine is not comprehensive. Peppard gives us much detailed research and speculation to add to Kraeling and many others to help us consider this early church.

Michael Peppard provides a historical and theological reassessment of the oldest Christian building ever discovered,

the third-century house-church at Dura-Europos. Contrary to commonly held assumptions about Christian initiation, Peppard contends that rituals here did not primarily embody notions of death and resurrection. Rather, he portrays the motifs of the church's wall paintings as those of empowerment, healing, marriage, and incarnation, while boldly reidentifying the figure of a woman formerly believed to be a repentant sinner as the Virgin Mary. This richly illustrated volume is a breakthrough work that enhances our understanding of early Christianity at the nexus of Bible, art, and ritual.

In this compelling analysis, Peppard astutely considers iconography and inscriptions in their actual liturgical and cultural contexts. Not only is it a methodological milestone and a good read, it unravels a few mysteries and undermines some long-standing assumptions about the world's oldest church."Robin M. Jensen, University of Notre Dame